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ARCHITECTURE CHALLENGES IN ATTAINING INCLUSIVE EDUCATION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES – SHARING EXPERIENCE FROM KOSOVO

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Abstract*: *Background: Education is continuing to develop different academic roles and services to meet the needs of society. The important value of education is more underlined in their built environment when they were supposed to undertake careful designs to avoid non-accessibility among space users. They also aim to create a good, efficient, and safe environment inside their premises. The built environment is a severe share of people with disabilities (PWDs)* attendance and continuation of the educational cycle.

Objectives: Exploring the preparedness of the educational built environment in Kosovo for the PWD's accessibility concerning building design modifications when ensuring adequate education, socialization, and a safe environment. Consequently, it reveals the contrasting ways architects and educational institutions outline and design for PWDs, and the range of doubtful models and approaches they bring to bear upon processes of architectural production and designing for PWDs (Hall et al., 1999). Furthermore, to understand the importance of architecture as one of the main factors influencing the education cycle of PWDs. Finally, and most importantly, how architecture causes this journey to stop.

Methods: The descriptive research method's survey, observation, and case study approach helps investigate the topic more in-depth and multi-sided. The research is conducted in all four educational levels: preschool, elementary school, high school, and higher education institutions.

Conclusions: All four educational levels (preschool, elementary school, high school, university/college) showcase more or less the same physical barriers, but what needs to be noted is that the higher education facilities foster more PWDs accessibility than preschool or elementary school. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance that the first levels of educational facilities have fulfilled the universal design standards, thus not discontinuing the educational cycle from the beginning and creating involuntary isolation and social non-inclusion. As a result, it will further influence thinking and how architects design in their practice besides sharing Kosovo's experience. The concept deals with the recommendations proposed on two scenarios for the Kosovo relevant institutions, the architect's community and educational institutions.

Keywords: architecture accessibility, design for all, Kosovo, educational facilities

Introduction

Producing architecture for every kind of user will mean improving accessibility for those with disabilities. However, designing for People with Disabilities (PWDs) is often an afterthought of the creative process (Boys,2014). The accessibility of PWDs has been a sensitively debated topic in the Kosovo architecture realm. It happens because PWDs have only sometimes been part of society. Consequently, their needs have been ignored. Numerous campaigns and advocacy for the rights of persons with disabilities in Kosovo have gained momentum in recent years. However, the participation of PWDs in public life continues to present challenges. Among the most underlined remains the built environment, the architectural design that does not treat all people's needs equally. Furthermore, it is the contrasting ways architects and educational institutions define and design for disability and the range of doubtful models and approaches they bring to bear upon processes of architectural production and designing for PWDs (Hall et al., 1999). It needs to be noted that this article targets people with physical disabilities who use wheelchairs; therefore, in most cases, the taxonomy of wheelchair users will be encountered.

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In Kosovo, statistics do not provide the exact number of people with disabilities, although there are 18,000 PWDs members at the NGO Handikos (HandiKOS, 2019). However, based on World Health Organization principles, according to which 10 to 15 percent of the population in the world live with disabilities, then, it turns out that in Kosovo, about 150 thousand to 255 thousand people belong to this category (Kasapolli-Selani, 2016). Given this large number of PWDs, fundamental human rights need legal recognition. Unfortunately, even though Kosovo provides a legal framework for PWDs, only 30% of the required international standards are integrated into the applicable laws governing these issues. Accessibility is one of the basic categories of disability rights. Therefore, improving the legislation on disability according to international standards by the Kosovo Institutions remains critical. According to the national laws and bylaws for the rights of PDWs, every person with disabilities enjoys the same right to education as any other person. Therefore, through educational institutions and those who manage education, the state must register, accommodate, and provide quality and proper education for everyone (HandiKOS 2019).

But on the other hand, the education of people with disabilities is only 30%. Therefore, it is vital to explore the preparedness of the educational built environment in Kosovo for the PWD's accessibility concerning building design modifications when ensuring adequate education, socialization, and a safe environment. Furthermore, to understand the importance of architecture as one of the main factors influencing the education cycle of PWDs. Finally, and most importantly, how architecture causes this journey to stop.

Access is not merely physical access.

We live in a world where individual movement, autonomy, and personal competence are highly valued and seen as ordinary. While people who are less than fully mobile, dependent on others, or seem "slow" become a problem (Boys 2014). The social environment is not open to the possibility of disability; in other words, the social climate often creates the opportunity for disability (Davis 1995). These physical or mental disabilities acquired from this environment often become connotations for accessibility (Rapley, 2013; Cook et al., 2012). And when it comes to architectural design, accessibility always

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comes as a peripheral consideration of the project and not as a fundamental thing.

In the design process in architecture, the approach should be considered a starting point, a need, and part of the concept. To better understand accessibility, the questions can be regarded as what is becoming accessible, and how is it becoming accessible? (Boys 2017) In the first question, it is always important to consider the prospective users, the function and destination of the building, and the spaces that PWDs need to utilize. Equipping buildings with architectural elements for the physical access of PWDs is only a tiny part of where architects need to focus (Imrie, 1998; Jackson, 2018). These elements are not enough to ensure accessibility to school activities. They facilitate access but just cannot be defined as access. Planning for comprehensive activities and the proper design of spaces represent a part of accessibility. The other part also penetrates all users' diversity in those spaces (Libertun de Duren et al., 2021).

Physical Disabilities and Education

If we look back at the history of people with disabilities, we see that they have permanently been excluded from the general education system by placing them in special schools. In addition to this categorization, their number in primary education registration is deficient. Therefore, even if they continue their education, most likely, these children will leave school earlier and without going to high school and beyond (Graham et al., 2019).

The lack of accurate statistics on the number of PWDs in Kosovo at the central level is a controversial issue, which also lacks the exact number of children attending school or not. However, the UNICEF Office in Kosovo has estimated that out of 43,000 children with disabilities, only 5,300 participate in regular public schools in Kosovo. Meanwhile, 38,000 children with disabilities in Kosovo do not attend school (UNICEF, 2019). Primarily it starts with social norms, which tend to stigmatize PWDs and remain with physical obstacles such as lack of adequate facilities (inaccessible classrooms and toilets) and unsatisfactory specialist support (UNICEF, 2019).

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Previously, the accessibility issue in educational institutions has been addressed scarcely on some small-scale projects, with a large part of the responsibility belonging to the architect. As a designer of the most built environment, the architect did not foresee the PWD's accessibility despite laws and administrative instructions regulating planning without barriers (Demjaha et al., 2002). Following this trend and according to the HANDIKOS report about the assessment of the accessibility of primary and lower secondary school buildings for children with disabilities in Kosovo, the following was found: ramps do not exist in 18% of the assessed facilities, while 55% of them are not built according to standards; in 72% of schools, there are no accessible toilets; 89% of schools have no elevator at all; out of 144 schools, access markings were encountered in only a few cases; 21% of schools do not offer enough space in the classrooms; while parking lots are 100% inaccessible (Basha, 2016). The deficiency of access to public spaces and amenities rejects PWD's unrestricted and independent movement, particularly in educational amenities requiring equal social participation. Moreover, the inadequacy of public amenities excludes them from public services while denying them the right to schooling, leading them to involuntary isolation (Basha, 2016).

Understanding why and how people are excluded gives us practical steps toward a comprehensive model. According to Microsoft, while accessibility is an attribute, inclusive design is one method. And while practising inclusive design should make products more accessible, it is not a process to meet all accessibility standards. Ideally, accessibility and inclusive design create experiences that are compliant with standards and truly usable and open to all (Microsoft 2016). Unfortunately, many architecture schools often refer to the inclusive design as something to think about later or as something that is added retroactively to the project. Even when we extend the idea of inclusive design, the problem remains: it is treated as something subsequent that has nothing to do with the architecture itself but brings up a discussion only after the architecture is complete (Imrie et al. 1996).

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Methodology

This paper's compilation is done descriptively using different data collection methods. Therefore, a considerable part of the paper consists of collecting and reviewing the existing literature in the theoretical and practical context of the national and international levels—the literature consists of books, various recordings, biographies, published statistics, scientific articles, etc. After analyzing these data, several educational institutions of different levels were randomly selected as case studies. In these cases, the study evaluated and identified the physical accessibility for PWDs. These assessments were made in the last two weeks of October 2020.

Furthermore, the blueprints of the plan were taken from the City Archive, and the changes these buildings have undergone to date were identified and investigated further. In addition, the architectural obstacles that people with wheelchairs encounter inside the buildings have been documented with photographs. Together with assessing technical requirements that a project must meet in Administrative Instruction no.33 / 2007 (MMPH 2016).

Further, quantitative research methods with qualitative elements are used, a mixed research model. Primary data collection and analysis consisting of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were performed. The questionnaires were equipped with closed and open questions. Two questionnaires were developed addressing two community groups, people with physical disabilities - wheelchair users, and the community of architects (a total of 98 questionaries', with eight questions). These questionnaires were received in digital form in January 2021. The data was collected anonymously, except for interviews where respondents could display their names. Finally, after completing the research study, the results of this data were evaluated and quantified. The investigation line culminates with a proposition of two possible scenarios that can address the subject of the study.

Study analysis

Considering the findings in the research conducted by HANDIKOS, it was evident that most schools have problems with physical accessibility. Extending

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the research in a narrative form on the educational journey of PWDs, several buildings of different levels of education have been selected by following the schooling path from preschool to higher education institutions. Accessible and inaccessible constructed and programmatic components of a facility of Universal Design are included during the analyzed case study considerations (Board 2015). The idea was to understand which levels of education could be clogged or do not provide a friendly user space for PWDs. The case studies were chosen randomly, even though all have a central position in the city and are very much frequented (fig. 1). Their prominent role in the capital of Kosovo sufficiently explains the accessibility and inclusion of PWDs at the state level. It should also be considered that the number of PWDs in some of these institutions goes to none; among other factors is the presence of numerous architectural barriers to wheelchair users. The analysis is done at the Preschool institution “Xixëllonjat”; Elementary School “Hasan Prishtina”; High School “Xhevdet Doda”; and the Faculty of Law and Economics at the University of Prishtina.

Figure 1. Selected case studies in the city of Prishtina (author: G. Morina).

Preschool Institution 'Xixëllonjat' (fig.2) was built in 1945. Its primary function was a health care centre, which was later adapted to its current function. It is positioned in the central area of Prishtina, which makes it easily accessible, although the topography in this part is a bit steep. Unfortunately, this kindergarten does not have PWDs parking. An architectural barrier

perceived at the entrance of the building does not allow children in wheelchairs to even enter the facility, much less to be involved in the educational process. The building is B + G, and all the classrooms are

Figure 2. Preschool Institution-physical barriers (author: G. Morina).

Position on the ground floor makes the classroom's horizontal traffic easily accessible. Since the basement is used only by the staff, this does not interfere with the free movement of PWDs. Toilets are among the spaces where PWDs could find problems using the small available space. In addition, the doctor's and administration office doors present barriers that would be difficult to cross. The materials used on the floor are parquet and tiles, wherein some parts are covered with carpet. The latter may show difficulty in manoeuvring the manual cart less freely and less in the electric one.

On the other hand, in the outdoor areas, it is noticed that the courtyard area does not provide space for play for wheelchair users. In addition, the pathway to the sports field makes access difficult and denies it overall (fig.2). Analyzing the gathered data. Each barrier causes a different difficulty leading to a chain of obstacles, which further causes the exclusion of almost all activities a child in a wheelchair may encounter in this building.

Primary school 'Hasan Prishtina' - was built in 1968, with 2187 students. This school is located in the Ulpiana neighbourhood, Prishtina. This building has a central position, but the topography in this location is quite steep. Access to the facility is challenging if the student in a wheelchair wants to go to school independently, especially when the plot does not have parking. The main entrance to the courtyard consists of several ramps built temporarily to carry goods for the school and by no means for PWDs.

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Figure 3. Location of the gymnasium "Hasan Prishtina" in the city of Prishtina and identification of the physical barriers (author: G. Morina).

Therefore, these ramps are not equipped with the correct elements and do not possess the proper slope for a wheelchair user. Moreover, it further increases the risk of their use. It needs bypassing with assistance on these ramps. The communication between the outer and inner space is on the same level. Although the doors are wide and easily passable, several other obstacles prevent further movement (fig. 3). The interview with the school's deputy director discussed how the inaccessibility in this school was highlighted during an event they had at their school. When Janis McDavid, motivational speaker and wheelchair user, visited the school, the latter had to improvise a ramp to attend the event, where he was the main protagonist (fig. 3). This highlighted the school's shortcomings further pushed forward the concern about the accessibilities of PWDs. It is more than evident that when this facility was designed, the rights of PWDs were not appropriately respected. The numerous barriers in this building mainly come from the slope of the terrain but without leaving aside the time when it was built. A person in a wheelchair attending this school can use the spaces, with someone's assistance at the main entrance hall, the two classrooms on the -2nd floor, and the football field in the schoolyard. The non-accessibility usually affects most classes they must attend, such as physical education, computer science, and other activities and events in the meeting room or different parts of the school. Most of these kids'

activities are trivial and are just trying to navigate a built environment where they are ignored.

High school "Xhevdet Doda"- is among the newest buildings investigated, built in 2010 and located in the neighbourhood Lakrishtë, a school of 1178 students. The pathway toward the entrance is flat and easily accessible. The plot has parking spaces but no parking dedicated to PWDs. The main entrance to the building consists of a ramp and stairs. Currently, this ramp has a distance of 10 meters and a slope of 9% (fig. 4). According to the Administrative Instructions, this may affect the independent movement of PWDs who need to pause and have time to rest after 6 meters of ramp length.

Figure 4. Location of the gymnasium "Xhevdet Doda" in the city of Prishtina and identification of the physical barriers (author: G. Morina).

The most accessible space of the building is the generous multifunctional area that allows students to participate in various activities. Although this facility has provided a ramp to the main entrance, it further deprives PWDs of participating in activities in other spaces, such as the outside sports field, the locker room in the gym, the library, the computer cabinet, and other cabinets. In addition, a lack of vertical circulation leads to separation from their peers in leisure activities and other classes. The building has a toilet dedicated to PWDs but lacks all the necessary elements. The abovementioned barriers are

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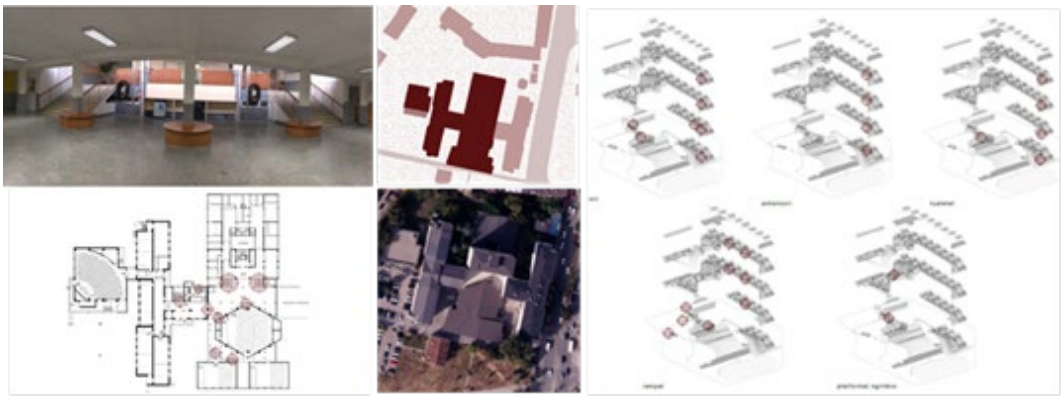
encountered on the ground floor, while the upper floors are inaccessible. Interviews with PWDs in higher education and those at high school have shown more discomfort in seeking help. All the more so when the design constantly highlights this need. Although this building offers more opportunities than other study cases, taking into account its recent construction, it still does not meet all the requirements that a student in a wheelchair needs.

Higher Education Institutions - Faculty of Law and Economics, UP "Hasan Prishtina," was established in 1961. This faculty has a central position and is part of the university campus in Prishtina. The path to the building is mainly flat, with a slight slope. The plot has parking lots, but no parking is marked for PWDs. The main entrance to the building consists of a ramp and stairs. Although the ramp has the proper slope, it does not possess the handrails for support. This faculty is filled with unevenness, degrees, and barriers that deny students with wheelchairs to run the administrative services independently, hold all lectures in the respective halls, consult with professors, etc. (fig.5). At this level of education, the level of awareness about physical barriers and the solidarity of others is even higher. With almost minimal investment, the potential for adaptation of these two integrated faculties could be accessible to wheelchair users.

Figure 5. Identification of barriers in the Faculty of Economics and Law (author: G. Morina).



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Discussion and proposal

All identified problems on the investigated buildings of four levels of the educational cycle are presented in the table (fig.6). It is evident that all four levels continue the pattern of difficulties that PWDs encounter during their education.

Figure 6.Accessibility table for all four case studies (author: G. Morina).

	Pre school	Elementary school	High school	University
Accessible entrance	x	x	♿	♿
Internal ramps	Not necessary	x	x	x
Elevator	x	x	x	x
Flooring	♿	♿	♿	♿
Accessible doors	♿	♿ only in class	♿	♿ only in some class
Accessible hall	♿	♿	♿	♿
Accessible toilet	x	x	♿	♿ nonfunctional
PWDs parking	x	x	x	x
Inclusion of PWDs in all activities	x	x	x	x
Inclusion of PWDs in all classes	x	x	x	x
Free circulation in wheelchair	♿	♿	♿	♿ only in some class
Inventory	x		x	x
Access to school management, administration	x	♿	♿	x

What PWDs take from their study experience is minimal activities, where all actions depend on others, thus highlighting their disability. By analyzing case studies, questionnaires, and interviews with wheelchair users who are still attending school or even those who have completed their studies, it has been understood that earlier levels of education show more significant motivation for intervention. Thus, by addressing the root of the problem and intervening at this level, PWDs education could take a different direction. Many schools need to provide space and opportunities to include PWDs in the learning process. Accessibility remains one of the most critical factors that directly affect the furtherance of PWD's education. Research has also shown that sometimes more than just one ramp at the main entrance is needed to solve the whole problem, so it is essential to understand how the building functions and how the PWDs should be included.

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The investigation line of the research progresses the study in two possible scenarios/proposals, targeting the elementary education level. The gathered research shows that the buildings of this level are significant to improve and are the critical levels of the educational cycle. However, different impetus can be triggered for all other levels. The first scenario is the possible minimal interventions (adds on) in the "Hasan Prishtina" school, an actual building. And second is a proposal for a new project (elementary school) in Arberia. Both of the proposed scenarios have different approaches to the planning process. The first one is after the building has been finished and the PWDs accessibility features have been added in the post-course. The second scenario gives a contrasting approach, whereas it starts from the PWDs accessibility and develops further the school design.

In the first scenario, the “Hasan Prishtina” addendum. Primarily, the physical barriers that pose mobility challenges are targeted, followed by discovering the possible interventions. The proposal significantly improves the PWD's free movement in the entire building. Initially, ramps were proposed at the main entrance, along with the stairs, and were moved inside the plot, thus freeing the sidewalk (fig.7). PWDs toilets have also been proposed, with minimal needed dimensions. For vertical communication, the new proposed elevator is also an integral part of the bridge that connects floor -1 with a part of the courtyard that leads directly to the sports hall (fig.7). A ramp at the entrance to the pre-primary level has been proposed. However, it has been impossible to intervene from the main entrance due to the narrow space. Therefore, a lifting platform was added to the main lobby and sports hall area, allowing PWDs access to the game room and other classes. The improvement of PWDs circulation in this building is shown in red (fig.7), representing the spaces with improved circulation. In white, some areas cannot be improved with minimal interventions. Therefore, a compromise to alleviate the situation should be considered and make the building accessible to almost all school activities.

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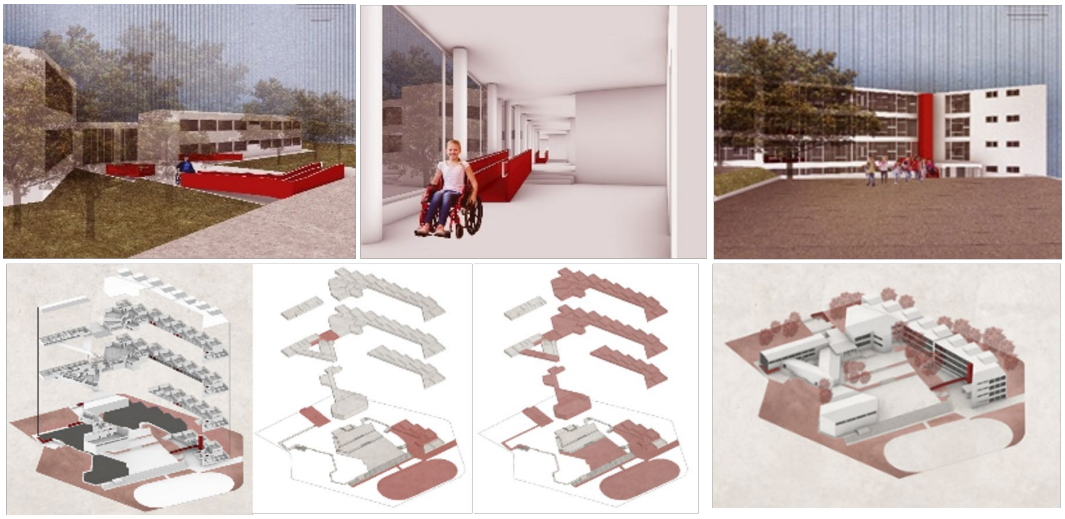
Figure 7.The first scenario design intervention at the primary school " Hasan Prishtina" (author: G. Morina).



By making this building accessible to all, the school's quality will increase. In addition, all children who use wheelchairs will have the opportunity to enjoy the school experience alongside their peers. Rather a society with a large circle of diversity is a healthy and promising society for the future.

The second scenario is the Arberia project. Recommendations of a prototype starting opposite the first scenario derived from situations where the building's intervention for free PWDs accessibility is impossible. Therefore, it is essential that during the design process of new projects, the needs of PWD are considered so as not to create problems that will later try to be solved. To have the best possible accessibility for PWDs, some architectural elements that have emerged from this research should be considered (fig.8). Also, these elements can be the starting point of the design process, making the whole design process more integrative.

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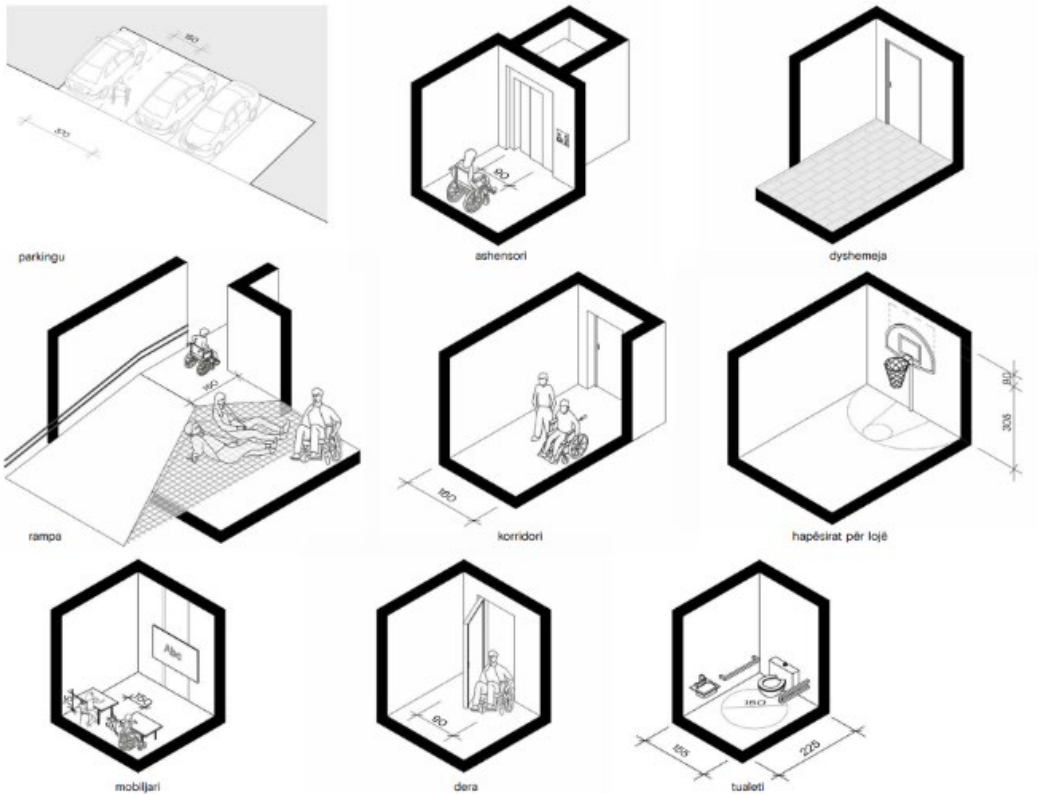
Figure 8. Accessibility premises (author: G. Morina).



According to the urban development plan of Prishtina, a new school is foreseen in the Arbëria neighbourhood. The aim is to develop a new school project with inclusive planning and design. The proposed functional scheme provides a conceptual solution of design that would give a more comprehensive approach. The operational plan has all the cabinets and some classrooms on the ground floor (fig.9). The classes are oriented to the southeast. In contrast, the cabinets have been moved to the north side, with lateral lighting from the proposed atrium. A direct connection has also been made from the main entrance to the southern part where the courtyard is located. This connection, along the way, passes through the multipurpose area, which can be equipped with ramps as a practical and creative solution. At the end of this space is the student's café, which could be part of the ramp composition, while its direct connection with the outdoor area offers a relaxing space for all students. Since on the west side, the slope of the terrain is greater; the sports hall has been located to that part to respect the height in the context of the location.

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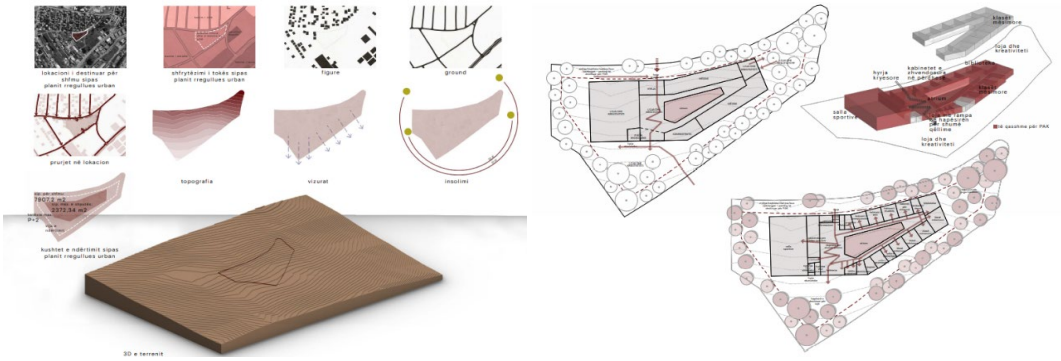
Figure 9. Second scenario proposal, new design project (author: G. Morina).



Although physical resilience does not entirely solve the inclusion of PWDs in society, it is the first and crucial step to achieving it. Therefore, such an advancement leads to a more integrative community. As an outcome of two scenarios and all the above investigation, this paper aims to conclude some general recommendations to the Kosovo relevant institutions and beyond: People with disabilities to become part of the design process in public projects; Simulation of disabilities leads to different stereotypes, so it is recommended that interaction between architects and PWDs be more significant to understand their needs better; The exchange can start from the schools of Architecture where PWDs can be invited and give their perspective. Whereas their needs can be used as a source of inspiration for creative design, rather than replicating solutions, Accessibility codes and rules may be more comprehensive but also more flexible. By giving people with disabilities all the opportunities for their education, we open the doors for those who further want to study architecture. This way, we would have more qualitative input from a person who faces disability and architecture professionally. Given that architecture was born in the past as a constant human need to adapt continually, today, it needs to adapt equally.

Conclusion

This research has come to understand the importance of including PWDs in society. Their right to education is protected by law and conventions, so the state must take appropriate measures to eliminate barriers and inaccessibility. In including PWDs in regular classes, the necessary tools and actors in the learning process should be provided. With the proper implementation of inclusive education, other students can also benefit. The interaction of

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architects and PWDs should be more notable, whereas their needs can be used as a source of inspiration for creative design rather than replicating them as solutions. All four educational levels (preschool, elementary school, high school, university/college) showcase more or less the same physical barriers. However, higher education facilities foster more PWDs accessibility than preschool or elementary schools. However, it could be more related to the activities accommodated in different educational levels, such as the one combined with play and physical activity, as well as the ratio of the higher education facilities with the overall population. Nevertheless, it is of utmost importance that the first levels of educational facilities have fulfilled the universal design standards, thus not discontinuing the educational cycle from the beginning and creating involuntary isolation and social non-inclusion.

Furthermore, this should be regarded when starting new projects by offering the broadest possible flexibility for future users. In addition, architects need to look beyond standardized solutions and bring innovative solutions through these elements for all groups in society. Considering the needs of others in the original design, rather than adapting one to fit additional requirements, could be what helps identify deficits in the design that the architect may have yet to consider. The best-designed public building projects improve the lives of all users of that building; by thinking creatively and with a great design, beautiful accessibility creates spaces that welcome everyone (Mortice 2019). Using inclusive design and inclusive schools, all children create influential personalities with excellent potential for empathy. Accessibility is more than physical access; it includes PWDs in society. Thus, they are a considerable advantage for society in the long run.

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