Ideas, even good ideas, flourish only when practitioners commit to sharing their experiences, perspectives and aspirations. By organizing this publication and convening a distinguished international group of contributors, Editor Isabella Tiziana Steffan helps to establish the current state-of-the-art and affirms the significant potential of Design-for-All. She also delivers fresh inspiration to an expanded audience critically important to engage if Design-for-All/Universal Design is to realize its promise in the coming years. With a growing international appetite, especially in the majority world, we must build a more robust literature so that the newly committed do not squander precious time repeating the steps of the earliest leaders but can instead stand on their shoulders. We salute Editor Steffan for her passion, focus and hard work to bring this valuable contribution to fruition.

Over the last fifteen years, a small international cadre of leaders has made a case for Design-for-All. The movement generated some remarkable exemplars across the design disciplines, a few stellar academic programs and occasional model policies but has not inspired the kind of broad adoption that not only shapes the identity of practitioners but filters into the consciousness of citizens, altering how we see ourselves in the world. Today, a constellation of factors appears likely to bring inclusive design to a tipping point that has the potential to shift expectations of what constitutes good design and set in motion a demand for robust expertise.

What is universal design, inclusive design, Design-for-All? The nomenclature is stabilizing after a period in which mostly geographically based camps defended an interpretation peculiar to one of the terms. Choice is now largely determined by local preference and tailoring words that resonate with different audiences. There is broad acceptance today that a variety of terms share, at least essentially, the same meaning. It’s a way of thinking about design, a framework for the design of places, things, information, communication, and policy that focuses on the user, on the widest range of people operating in the widest range of situations without special or separate design. I am not alone in suggesting that it is time to call out not only ability...
Evidence that accessible design proved beneficial for everyone and the fact that we have never lived so long nor survived so much gave birth to inclusive design. A changing paradigm acknowledged functional limitation as a universal human experience. It paired with shifting trends in the etiology and types of conditions that impact function from chronic conditions like asthma and diabetes to a worldwide surge in the prevalence of brain-based disorders from autism spectrum disorder to traumatic brain injury. The World Health Organization and World Bank reported in their seminal 2011 World Report on Disability that approximately one out of seven people live with disability and that 80% of them are in the majority nations. But nothing has come close to inclusive design’s most potent catalyst: global aging.

Life expectancy has been extended by an average of 30 years since 1900 in developed nations. Though far less dramatic in emerging nations, the demographic phenomenon of aging impacts the entire planet. Globally, the percentage of people aged 60 or more will triple by 2050. Even though the percentage of total population over 60 is starker in wealthier developed countries, the absolute number of people over 60 years of age is larger in the developing nations because of the enormous populations of some of the emerging nations. In 2005, it was 64% of all people 60 or older in the world were in the emerging nations, expected to be 80% by 2050. The prototypical markers for development are lower fertility rates and longer lives. To appreciate the magnitude of the issue, consider that China projects over 400 million people over 60 years of age by 2050. Design-for-All may be only part of the answer but we can’t afford to ignore any strategy that is possible to implement without massive infusions of resources and has the promise to sustain independence and quality of life into old age.

Not surprisingly, the UN has generated a set of international policies in the last decade that support the significance of design in human experience and social participation. The World Health Organization’s (WHO) 2001 definition of disability, the International Classification of Function, Disability, and Health (WHO/ICF) delivers an unparalleled call to action for designers who create the context in which we live our lives. The WHO/ICF mainstreamed the experience of functional limitation as intrinsic to human experience and equalized mental and physical reasons for functional limitation. It defined disability as a contextual variable, dynamic over time, and in relation to circumstances - one is more or less disabled based on the interface between you and the physical, communication, information, social, and policy environments with which you interact. The WHO/ICF called for the identification of “facilitators” that go beyond barrier removal to enhance the experience of all people. WHO specifically referenced universal design as the most promising framework for identifying facilitators.

The United Nation’s Second World Assembly on Ageing: Madrid Political Declaration and International Plan of Action 2002 also pointed to the power of design in Priority Direction III: Ensuring enabling and supporting environments. Then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan embraced the vision of inclusion in his opening remarks at the Madrid event: “Our fundamental objective is building a society fit for all people of all ages.”

And the most recent UN policy, the 2008 U.N. Convention on the Human Rights of People with Disabilities (CRPD), was the third supplement to the International Human Rights Treaty, adding detailed guidance for protecting the human rights of people with disabilities as it had previously offered supplements tailored to the rights of women and children. The CRPD begins with the base of the WHO/ICF and codifies design as a human right. Though funds to support implementation of the CRPD have been scarce, the Internet has delivered the news to the most obscure corners of the world. Disabled People’s Organizations in places like Uganda and Nepal are developing their own programs, doing outreach to peers in more isolated places and searching for information and precedents that will allow them to avoid reinventing the wheel.

Conflating accessibility/barrier-free and design-for-all/Inclusive design has been a persistent conceptual impediment, resulting in interpretations of human centered design as a minor upgrade to basic accessibility. With the broad adoption across the world community of the CRPD (153 nations out of the 193 UN member states), there is a pervasive common understanding of accessibility as a shared commitment. It has freed up attention to inclusive design as a more expansive and vigorous interpretation of design as a social art for a new world.

Environmentally sustainable design, born of the failure to be good stewards
of the planet over the last century, has achieved a sense of urgency and broad embrace by clients and the general public as well as design students and practitioners. It is time to consider the strategic value and practical opportunity of integrating Design-for-All as a core tenet of socially sustainable design. Environmental sustainability has changed the practice of design fundamentally, given new weight to science and research as intrinsic to the design process and, in so doing, delivered a seemingly bottomless stream of innovative materials and processes. Socially sustainable design is seldom defined at all and generally understood to include multiculturalism, sensitivity to economic disparity and local food. Making inclusive design intrinsic to a global understanding of social sustainability not only responds to the urgent summons to heed demographic realities of the present and future but invites us to parallel the focus on research and science that has delivered critical tools so compelling that it influences the entire enterprise of design.

I believe that we can set in motion an energetic new chapter for human-centered design. It is time to build new collaborations between design and science inclusive of our closest kin (ergonomics, human factors, anthropometrics and rehabilitation engineering, allied health professionals) but also the social sciences of psychology, sociology and ethnography and emerging fields such as neuroscience and synthetic biology. It’s time to invent new collaborative models of working that bring together designers, experts in all relevant sciences but also, on an equal footing, the “user/experts.” User/experts are people with personal knowledge of functional limitations - physical, sensory or brain-based, including the systemic changes of aging - who’ve developed a keen sense of where design fails as well as what works. The design challenge is open-ended and includes a need for fresh thinking for design at home, at work, in learning environments, fitness/recreation/sport, culture, transportation, community and urban design, healthcare. There is a staggering volume of work still undone, insights yet to be uncovered, people with talents and capacities just awakening to the idea that they might carve their own path, and older people finding ways to grow old with comfort, confidence and control. It’s time.

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ERGONOMIA E DESIGN FOR ALL: UN APPROCCIO INCLUSIVO ALLA PROGETTAZIONE.

L’Ergonomia e il Design For All si sono sviluppati per lungo tempo seguendo percorsi che possiamo definire paralleli, affrontando temi in gran parte simili osservati però da differenti punti di vista e con differenti obiettivi, sino a trovare negli ultimi anni punti di contatto sempre più frequenti ed estesi, che hanno definito campi di ricerca e ambiti di intervento nei quali i principi e gli obiettivi tendono di fatto a convergere.

Dal punto di vista teorico, l’approccio Design For All si è progressivamente spostato da un approccio di marcata specializzazione, finalizzato a rispondere ai bisogni e alle aspettative delle persone con disabilità, a un approccio compiutamente inclusivo che, partendo dalle esigenze di specifici settori di utenza, è finalizzato alla realizzazione di prodotti capaci di rispondere ai bisogni e alle aspettative della globalità dell’utenza.

Come scrive Isabella Steffan, le stesse definizioni di Design For All considerano infatti il DFA come un approccio “basato su un quadro esigenziale olistico che ingloba i bisogni più diversificati degli utilizzatori, che comprenda anche le esigenze inespresse di utenti non sempre considerate, ad es. quelle delle persone con disabilità cognitive, dei bambini ma anche degli stranieri, delle persone con diversi background culturali”.

L’approccio DFA è finalizzato oggi alla realizzazione di prodotti pienamente fruibili e sicuri per persone con ridotte capacità, la cui immagine, le cui funzioni, le cui modalità di impiego possano essere rivolte alla totalità dell’utenza. Come scrive Isabella Steffan, è infatti il concetto di “fruibilità”, intesa come possibilità di godere interamente del bene (prodotto, ambiente, servizio), a segnare il passaggio da una progettazione rivolta a garantire la sola accessibilità (fisica o percettiva) dei luoghi e degli oggetti, ad una concezione pienamente inclusiva dell’azione progettuale, finalizzata a garantire l’effettivo benessere delle persone indipendentemente dal loro livello di abilità.

Un analogo percorso si è sviluppato nel campo dell’Ergonomia, nel quale, all’originario nucleo di conoscenze sulle caratteristiche e le capacità umane, e allo studio delle condizioni di sicurezza dei luoghi e delle attività di