

# Accessible-to-All Cities. A Project of Networking Italian Experiences to Raise Awareness and Promote Universal Design

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**Abstract.** In 2016 the Italian National Institute of Urban Planning (INU) launched the project *Accessible-to-all Cities*, aimed at fostering the creation of an inclusive environment for improving universal accessibility to places and services at both scales of the city and the territory, by networking accessibility good practices and stakeholders from all corners of the country. Since then, a community of public and private subjects gathered by INU has been established and growing, sharing experiences, problems and solutions. Through the organization of dozens of meetings, seminars, workshops, conference sessions and webinars, more than 200 experiences developed in Italy have been collected, including studies and research, public policies, projects and actions, both material and immaterial, concerning the overcoming of different kind of barriers: physical, sensory, perceptive, intellectual, cultural, social, economic, health and gender. On these bases, in 2019, the INU *Accessible-to-all Cities* Community launched an open web archive, an initiative that intends to contribute to increasing awareness and knowledge, as well as to facilitate the implementation and development of actions and policies, by leveraging the good practices widespread, but often little known, in Italy.

**Keywords.** Urban accessibility, Urban planning, Integrated policies, Urban wellbeing

## 1. Introduction

In countries where the concepts of accessibility, inclusion and usability have been applied for years in different contexts of society, so-called ‘Accessible Communities’ are beginning to be structured. This is one of many definitions: an accessible community is barrier-free and doesn’t limit anyone’s participation in everyday life. In accessible communities, people with disabilities can be active participants. Ensuring that such communities exist — and thrive — is important because both people with disabilities and their neighbors benefit. Accessible communities: allow for the interaction and engagement of all members, reduce social isolation, and improve mental health for people with disabilities, increase economic gains for local businesses, and improve physical health opportunities and outcomes for all. Being part of a community means more than just living within its borders. It involves embracing opportunities for socialization within that community [1].

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These are initiatives of great value, pushing all members of a community, both public and private, to raise performance levels in order to become more accessible in a perspective of hospitality and recognition of the rights of all to participate in life in society. This follows the trend of shifting the focus from the single individual to the community in which he or she lives, with the idea that it must be the community that takes charge of all its members so that no one is left out, thus strengthening the right of the individual under the "umbrella" of the community [2].

To date, there are still many urban and regional contexts in which, however, the concepts related to Universal Design (UD) are struggling to find acceptance. This is also the case in Italy, even though the Constitution of the Republic itself establishes that the State has the duty to remove the economic and social obstacles which limit the freedom and equality of citizens and therefore prevent the full development of the human person and the actual participation of everybody to the political, economic, and social organization of the country [3].

Since the late 1970s Italy has technical norms to make buildings accessible to disabled users, which have been followed in the mid-1980s by a National Law that makes them mandatory for new public or open-to-public buildings and obliges all institutions to adequate the existing ones. In 1992 the same principle was extended to public space and services, e.g., public transport and bathing facilities at the seaside. Since then, all Municipalities must draw up Plans for the Elimination of Architectural Barriers (PEBAs) (national Laws no. 41/1986, 104/1992). More recently Italy has ratified the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2006), with a specific law (Law no. 18/2009) which establishes the National Observatory on the conditions of Persons with Disabilities.

Unfortunately, these principles and rules are often disregarded or applied in a very partial, narrow-minded, formal, or boreoarctic way; there are still many obstacles to putting UD principles into practice. The biggest challenge to face is not about regulations or finding funding, but a profound cultural change. In fact, in Italy accessibility is still mainly understood as the elimination of individual barriers (architectural, but also of other nature) rather than the creation of interconnected systems and services usable and inclusive according to UD criteria. There are, however, several good practices that, although minority, show an attempt to go beyond these outdated conceptions. The foresight of administrators, professionals, and researchers who, finding the right contexts, have decided to explore approaches, processes and tools from a UD perspective is the premise on which the *Accessible-to-all Cities* initiative, promoted by the National Institute of Urban Planning (INU), is based.

The paper will report on this important project, which has led to the establishment of the largest Italian network of both public and private entities that since 2016 have been working to create more accessible spaces and contexts for all. The main goal of the network is to contribute to improve the knowledge base, as well as to facilitate the implementation and development of actions and policies: the lack of dedicated policies and integration is nowadays, in fact, one of the most critical issues to be addressed to deal more effectively with issues related to accessibility of public spaces, private places, collective and individual services, transport.

## 2. From the birth of the cluster to the consolidation of the project

INU is a non-profit association, member of the European Council of Town Planners, which in 2020 turned 90 years old. Since 1949, the Institute is recognized by the Italian State as a "high culture and technical coordination institution" and, since 1997, as an Association for the Protection of the Environment. Members include urban planners, architects, engineers working as professionals, scholars or public officers, as well as other experts concerned on the issues of the city and territory, like economists, sociologists, lawyers and so on; but also public institutions, universities, professional orders, other associations, etc. INU is present in each Italian region with a regional division, but it is also organized into thematic groups or "communities", focused on different planning issues, like transport and infrastructure, climate adaptation and mitigation, urban regeneration, etc. Communities work together in a cross-disciplinary way and are also open to external contributions.

The *Accessible-to-all Cities* (AtaC) project was born within the Community of the same name, which presented it in the framework of *Il paese che vorrei* (The country I would like), a collateral event of the 29th INU Congress, held in Cagliari on April 28-30<sup>th</sup>, 2016. The initiative is aimed at fostering the creation of an inclusive environment for improving full accessibility in activities and services, at both scales of the city and the territory, by networking accessibility good practices and stakeholders from all corners of the country.

One of the most relevant aspects of the project is its adherence to the UD principles, which teach that the accessibility of places, goods and services cannot be understood exclusively in terms of motor and mobility aspects. To intervene on total accessibility, otherwise known as '360° accessibility', objective data on the dimensional and motor characteristics of the population are not enough; it is also necessary to investigate the needs, perceptions, desires, and dreams of all potential users. Great importance is given, in fact, to meeting, listening and participation initiatives, where technicians and decision-makers can collaborate with stakeholders in order to find shared solutions.

### 2.1. Development and consolidation of *Accessible-to-all Cities*

Since its start, the AtaC project has been developed through three-year programs, the first of which, finalized in 2018, has focused on the development of the community through the implementation of numerous public actions in regional, national and international contexts. Through the participation and the organization of dozens of meetings, seminars, workshops, conference sessions, where ideas, experiences and perspectives on '360° accessibility' were shared and discussed, facilitated by moderators according to the design thinking methodology [4], a wider community of public and private subjects has established and is still growing around the INU promoting group, including civil associations, representatives of disabled people, Italian regions and municipalities, universities, trade and professional associations, single freelancer and scholars. Some of these occasions have been held in the framework of national events supported by the INU, like the Public Space Biennale in Rome, the Urbanpromo and Urbanpromo Green conferences in Venice and Milan, and the INU Study Day in Naples.

A first collection of about 100 good practices was published at the end of 2017 by INU, including studies and research, public policies, projects and actions, both material and immaterial, concerning the overcoming of different barriers, that is:

- physical, sensorial, and cognitive barriers, which affect the independence and quality of life of the individuals and community, as well as the access to mobility, urban facilities and public space;
- cultural barriers, concerning the access to heritage, museums and natural areas;
- social barriers, which affect the mutual relationships between people, and the degree of inclusion of the living and working environments;
- health and safety barriers, with regards to the access to health-care and the right to live in a safe environment;
- economic barriers, depending on work conditions and the affordability of housing, consumer goods, leisure and tourism opportunities.

Since the publication of the book, the number of collected practices is more than doubled. Mobility is one of the recurring topics, along with accessibility to public space and cultural heritage and tourism.

## 2.2. *Initiatives to expand the network*

The project is currently in its second phase 2019-2022 (the one-year delay was imposed by the ongoing Covid-19 health emergency) and is aimed at promoting two main initiatives: the *Accessible-to-all Cities Award* dedicated to students and young researchers, and the implementation of the experimental *Pact for Urban Planning, towards Accessible-to-all Cities* in eight pilot cities (see Chapter 4).

The activities of the community continue to promote the actions of listening and comparison to strengthen the constantly growing network. The network is also becoming a tool with which to stimulate the debate on accessibility, and through which to encourage the launch of new strategies and solutions to create truly inclusive cities.

In the current three-year period, two other directions are also being explored: the European opportunities offered by the Structural Funds in view of the 2021-2027 programming; relations with other networks that deal with the well-being of the individual, such as those related to soft mobility, housing, public city services and the environment.

## 3. **The Atlas and the importance of online dissemination**

The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has showed the strategic importance of the web and ICT tools that have allowed the creation of networks despite the forced isolation. The peculiarities related to the web have emerged clearly with the decision in 2019 to create a website dedicated to the dissemination of the projects collected over the months, considered the best tool available, today, to systematize knowledge, data and experiences stimulating their use for the purpose of the widest replicability.

The online portal<sup>2</sup>, called ‘Atlas’ in reference to the fact that it is intended to be an extensive collection of data, materials and information, was also conceived to be a point of reference and a work in progress: a platform designed to be implemented with new cases and experiences, which by returning the state of the art provides at the same time a series of lines and directions to build new tools, new processes, new training courses on the theme of accessibility for all. The Atlas is aimed at all those public and private

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<sup>2</sup> The portal is available on [atlantecittaccessibili.inu.com](http://atlantecittaccessibili.inu.com)

entities that intend to start planning investments in the field of accessibility, offering methods, techniques and models already tested at the local level and potentially replicable. It makes available a large amount of data and information related to the projects collected with the specific purpose of creating a shared project base able to support institutions and organizations in the start-up of new projects. The sharing of data and practices in a single container facilitates networking at the national level by allowing a broad comparison on common research goals, actions oriented to identify complex areas of need, common fields of innovation. By being able to easily frame similar contexts, many of which use practices that follow the principle of replicability, an organization's design effort can turn to developing the solution set with a lower expenditure of resources, while also limiting the number of so-called pioneers [5] and reducing the uncertainty of choices. Another important aim of setting up the network is to connect those promoters who, facing similar experiences, can benefit from the comparison and make the experimentation of new solutions more effective. Sharing critical issues and errors is essential in avoiding low project scalability, while reducing the risk of failure.

Joining the network is an opportunity to learn from the experiences of other members and to enhance one's own through the creation of a community of practice. Promoting project laboratories and seminars, the network becomes a place where different competences with divergent points of view have the possibility to confront each other concretely in order to try to overcome obstacles, through the sharing of languages between planning and programming in a perspective of real integration [6].

### 3.1. *The interrogable map and integrated policy guidelines*

A dedicated section of the Atlas is devoted to *Practices and places*. All the collected good practices are mapped in a web-gis map<sup>3</sup> and indexed in a database to be easily searchable. By clicking on the map, the user is directed to the downloadable sheet of any project, which provides the full description of the project itself, chronology and state of the art, costs, a description of the process followed by the initiative from the very beginning to present, the list of proposers and involved stakeholders, and one or more contact addresses. The mapped items are searchable, by spatial or thematic keys. Spatial keys distinguish between practices at the local or regional scale; the thematic keys, include the following four items: projects, tools, processes, training.

- *Projects* refer to the use of spaces, time and services in the city and the territory. The most recurring application fields are sustainable mobility, public space, tourism for all; all projects are intended as a contribution to urban welfare and addressed to promote the autonomy in urban living of every citizen.
- *Tools* refer to spatial planning and organization. The objective is integrating 360 degree-accessibility into urban and regional planning, as well as into public works programming, from the level of ordinary maintenance to the construction of new urban infrastructure.
- *Processes* refer to the building-up of integrated, inclusive, and interactive policies. The collected practices are examples of how establishing a stable and constant dialogue between stakeholders, to share, discuss and monitor accessibility projects.

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<sup>3</sup> The map has been created using the dedicated software uMap, through the open source platform "Open Street Map", and is available by typing "[Atlante Città Accessibili](#)"

Promoting participatory co-design is assumed as one of the main objectives to be pursued for achieving 360 degree-accessibility.

- *Training* refers to all those practices aimed either at increasing social awareness or the know-how of professionals, communities, public officers and so on, in the making of accessibility projects and initiatives, considering their actual feasibility, management over time, fund-raising.



**Figure 1.** screenshots of the map in the atlas. The initiatives present are categorized by type and color. Choosing to view the initiatives carried out in Milan, i.e., a window appears with links to download the detailed sheets.

Another section is devoted to the so-called *Network of knowledges*, where the reports and summaries of workshops and conferences are recorded. Public meetings and discussion tables are the main source of the issues and proposals discussed inside the community and of the knowledge of real-life experiences which is the basis for innovating policies and planning.

A third section is devoted to the *Guidelines for integrated policies*, which are derived from the discussions held during the seminars and workshops and from the “lessons learnt” from the good practices. The Guidelines have been elaborated by a work group of the Community, with an important contribution of the Department of Engineering and Architecture of the University of Trieste, which is a partner of AtaC together with other Italian University departments, like the Department of Architecture in Florence. The guidelines are structured in four chapters, which correspond to the four types of actions mapped in the section “Practices and Places” of the Atlas – that is, again: *Projects*, *Tools*, *Processes*, and *Training*. The basic assumptions that inform the guidelines can be summarized as follows.

- A city is accessible when it allows the largest number of people with different abilities to move as much as possible autonomously and safely to reach public spaces and facilities for collective use, between the living place and the places of everyday activities. It is therefore necessary to design or redesign urban space and facilities to make them user-friendly, safe, pleasant to the eye, to the hearing, to the touch and to the smell, fun, not redundant or invasive. According to the principle of UD and place-making, urban design should not provide solutions specifically

dedicated to people with disabilities but create an urban environment in which everyone can feel included. Accessibility for-all must be assumed as an essential feature of all urban redevelopment and regeneration projects, according to the meaning of sustainable city delivered by the UN Agenda 2030.

- As far as planning and programming tools are concerned, what is most important is overcome the sectoral nature that still generally connotes accessibility tools and policies. That implies, on the one hand, to use the PEBA as a project instrument for improving public space and the streetscape of the city and, on the other hand, to integrate accessibility as a performance indicator of urban planning, public works and all other procedures related to the transformation and management of the city.
- Targeting the inclusive city, processes are not less important than projects. Accessibility is a cross-cutting theme in public policies, which claims for a permanent dialog among all sectors of public administration dealing with urban and territorial issues, with special regards to those which have implications on the physical space. Moreover, it requires a dialogue with other institutional and non-institutional stakeholders which can provide special expertise or represent the specific demands of different kinds of users. Participation and co-designing should therefore become current practice in the development and management of spatial plans, policies, and projects. Such a multisectoral approach should be applied to the various operational fields and scales: from urban planning and design to the interior architecture of public buildings; from social and health welfare facilities to public space and mobility; from the protection, management and enhancement of the historical heritage to new developments and redevelopments.
- Education and training are essential issues for spreading and consolidating a new culture of accessibility. Targeted projects should be addressed to schools and universities, professionals, and public officers at any level of public administration. The discussion of best practices is an effective way to stimulate emulation and disseminate successful approaches, methodologies, and procedures. Public authorities, universities and civic associations should cooperate in promoting campaigns for inclusive cities and territories.

### *3.2. Social media channels*

Nowadays, being present on social media is essential, especially for private companies: it is a way to communicate, and it goes to integrate a digital marketing strategy in a broader way, which has the goal of increasing sales. The goal of Social Media Marketing is visibility, brand reputation, relationship, and trust with users. However, social media can also be leveraged by organizations, associations, or nonprofits to create interest around a particular issue or campaign [7], as in the case of the AtaC Community.

The first step taken was to take advantage of social media to talk about the project, through the opening of a dedicated Facebook page and the opening of a Youtube channel. The Facebook page has about 1000 followers without any economic resources or sponsorships being invested; it is used to spread the collected projects and ongoing initiatives. The Youtube channel collects about 30 videos, mainly produced by INU, in which the members of the group disseminate the project.

Since there is no funding dedicated specifically to the communication of the project, currently the work of managing social channels is done voluntarily by some members of the community. It is the intention, however, to search for sponsorship to promote specific

campaigns, in order to raise awareness of accessibility for all, expand the network, establish partnerships with both the public and private sectors.

## 4. Ongoing initiatives

### 4.1. *Accessible-to-all Cities Award*

The *Accessible-to-all Cities Award*, established by Inu in 2020, is funded by the Genoa Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture, the National Research Council and Cerpa Italia Onlus. The prize is awarded through a call for proposals for innovative works on accessibility at 360° carried out in Italy or abroad, specifically master's thesis and PhD. The initiative is particularly important in raising awareness on the issue of accessibility for all, because it acts on the place designated for training those who will help to spread the culture of accessibility in the near future.

At the very first edition 20 works participated, in response to the proposed central themes related to accessibility at 360° in different contexts of reference (within urban parts, within larger areas), in which to consider the limitations imposed on the quality of life of people due to the presence of barriers of different types. At the second edition other 20 works attended, both from Italy and from other countries. Currently open the call for the third edition.

### 4.2. *Pact for urban planning, towards Accessible-to-all Cities*

The *Pact for urban planning, towards Accessible-to-all Cities* is the experiment that the INU Community is developing with 8 medium and little-sized cities from North to South Italy: Udine, Mantua, Genoa, Reggio Emilia, Ancona, Leghorn, Spello, and Taranto. Working together and sharing their experiences, the eight cities intend to: define and apply integrated solutions to improve the quality of life; systemize welfare measures, provisions, and services; offer their communities competitive advantages related to accessibility and sustainability in line with the UN Agenda 2030; go beyond the logic of the single intervention to overcome barriers and inequalities; promote a comprehensive approach to urban well-being.

The topics covered by the joint work are:

- strategic planning must be able to provide an overall vision of the city in order to foster coherence and integration in policies, plans and interventions concerning the overcoming of barriers, the reduction of inequalities, and solutions to fragility;
- the drafting of general planning tools must pay particular attention to knowledge of the new living conditions brought about by the pandemic and to solutions for providing welfare with adequate services for the autonomy of all people;
- The realization of urban projects of social redevelopment/regeneration of neighbourhoods must promote active soft mobility, and more inclusive public spaces and urban green spaces.

The experimentation proposed by the Pact, lasting two years, helps to build a system of accessibility that goes beyond the logic of the single intervention to overcome the barriers allows to achieve a broader goal of overall quality and gives shape to the relationships with other welfare networks such as those of soft mobility, living, work, vitality of the public city and environment.



## 5. Conclusions and future developments

Considering the tendency of organizations to consider themselves bearers of completely original and unique identities, values and operational proposals, an aspect that can be defined as presumption of exclusivity [8], promoting collaboration and networking is not so simple. However, belonging to a network allows the exchange of information, human and even economic resources that otherwise would not be possible.

The hope of the initiatives put in field by the AtaC Community is to reach, through the adhesion to the network, a rationalization of the planning and economic efforts, with an employment of the eventual freed resources in the activation of other services or in the same support of the network. One of the aims of the Atlas is not only to systematize good practices, but also to represent the pivot of a national communication campaign to be promoted to increase awareness of the tested solutions. The call to stakeholders is “forbidden not to copy”: we are committed, today as never before, to finding the original idea, the unprecedented solution, the unique strategy, the special product. But the winning action is the result of a process that passes through many minds, many hands. In order to move in this direction, the community is moving to open up to other contexts, including international ones: hence the very real need to commit to making all materials available also in English, necessary condition so that the network can expand and confront a much wider context.

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