

You First Podcast - Accessibility Outside the Box Episode 2: City Planning

Maddie Crowley: You're listening to "You First," The Disability Rights Florida Podcast. On this episode of our series, "Accessibility Outside the Box," let's learn about accessibility and city planning.

[background music]

Maddie: Hi, there. I'm Maddie, co-host of the You First podcast. We're excited to be back with our second episode of our series, Accessibility Outside the Box, after such a great start last week.

Keith Casebonne: Definitely. Hey, folks. I'm Keith, the other co-host of the podcast. Last week, we chatted with Olivia Shivas and Rebecca Dubber about travel and vacationing. At one point, they talked a bit about universal design and how to make things accessible for everyone from the start.

Maddie: That conversation got me thinking. How can we make more spaces accessible for all? What kind of jobs may focus on universal design?

Keith: Thankfully, our next guest does just that. We're excited to have Nora Libertun on the podcast. She is a global leading expert on urban planning and design, sustainability, and social inclusion.

Maddie: We're so excited to have her on the show today. Her work revolves around making everything in a city more accessible from the layout, transportation, to even recreation. She will talk about how cities need to be designed for everyone to utilize, especially folks with disabilities.

Keith: Hi, Nora. Thanks so much for being our guest today. Can you introduce yourself, who you are, and what you do for our audience?

Nora Libertun: Hello, Keith. Thank you so much for inviting me. My name is Nora Libertun, and I am currently working for the Inter-American Development Bank. I am an expert in urban planning, urban design, and regional development. I'm also an adjunct assistant professor at Columbia University where I teach about inclusive cities.

By the way, all the opinions I'm going to share with you now are just my opinions, not of those institutions. Regarding my background, I am an architect from the University of Buenos Aires and then I studied a master's in urban design at Harvard University, and then a PhD in regional planning at MIT.

Before joining the Inter-American Development Bank, I was the director of planning for New York City, Department of Parks and Recreation. We led the development of open space, and that was where my love for inclusionary spaces began I have to say.

Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Keith: Thanks for being our guest. We're honored to have you here. Let's start with the most basic question. What exactly is city planning or urban development?

Nora: Thank you. It's not basic at all. It's a very difficult question.

Keith: [laughs] True, I'm sure.

Nora: Basically, city planning is a way to have a spatial understanding of how a city is and how it can grow. It has a combination of data and vision at the same time. It's very much rooted on the territory. It has to do with the decision on what to do with the space.

Because we all have different opinions, it requires a lot of agreements and governance. That's why we have all these guidelines, tools, and conversations about this.

Keith: If there's one person planning a city, it would be more straightforward. Unfortunately, like you said, it sounds like there's a lot of people involved. Getting agreement and consensus must be a very big aspect and challenging aspect.

Nora: Yes, and not only that foundational. We envision things, which also is a challenge, as you said, in terms of having a common agreement. Then things that we did not envision do happen, for example, COVID and climate change. How is it affecting what we need?

Even changes in technology are opening up opportunities and desires to do things. It's a very evolving practice that needs conversation, agreements, and innovation all the time.

Keith: I think most people take it for granted. They're in their city. That's the layout. They don't really think about what goes into it. It's fascinating to think about that other side of it.

Nora: There's a lot to do. One of the things to highlight is how many different kind of knowledge you need to build a city, from someone who knows how to dig holes for a subway or even for a house to someone who knows how to calculate traffic, to paint signs, to build buildings, or to have a conversation and bring different people to the table.

As I said, now we're learning about climate, environment, pollution, and so many other things. It's definitely a very old practice. We know even from the Romans or before Romans about people planning cities, but we are never done with it. We always have new challenges.

Keith: It makes sense. You're right, it's far from basic, for sure. Let's talk a little bit about that in terms of accessibility. How can we make city planning accessible?

Nora: It's an important concept. How can we make it accessible? I think that we have to talk both about the process and the product, as I was trying to convey at the beginning of this conversation. When we talk about the product, we think, "How can we make a city work for everybody?" What do we mean by work for everybody?

We mean that anyone, regardless of his or her identity or things that are not within his or her control, can have access to the opportunities that cities have. Opportunities for enjoyment, work, living, for entertaining. That's about creating a city that is accessible. An inclusive city.

Then there's something about the process. Which is, "How can anyone have a say on this conversation on this vision of a city?" It becomes important to have the opportunities at both ends of the table because -- as I said -- this is a constant construction.

It wouldn't be enough to say we are building a city that is inclusive, but with a sign that without including anyone else but this small group of people.

Also, we tend to have better outcomes when the conversation is more diverse. We realize about different things that we haven't noticed. We become more creative, and innovation is likely to occur. I think it's a win-win situation.

Keith: Definitely. I'm sure one of the big challenges is that a city...It's not we're building that many cities from the ground up, so you've got existing cities that are set up a certain way. To make them more inclusive and accessible for people with disabilities, that involves change.

You don't get to start from the beginning and say, "Let's plan this city and make it accessible." You have to instead take an existing city that's not accessible, not inclusive, and start adding in essentially things that will make it more accessible.

What are some of the challenges involved in that? I assume that the same thing where there's a lot of different voices and a lot of different experiences. Maybe buddy had some times through that.

Nora: That's a very insightful observation. We have to deal with what we have this far. We have to build better. One of the things that they want to highlight here is the transformative power of new technologies.

For example, we have seen the way in which apps are making places more accessible than before. Of course, building and construction is the backbone of a city, but I would also like to highlight the way that some technologies are speeding up the process and making it more and more rapid adaptation to changes.

For example, at the beginning of COVID, many people used signs to inform the public about how to behave. Like, where you should stand. Of course, that was not something that would include everybody. Some people cannot read a sign for many reasons.

For example, apps were very useful for helping people to navigate these places in a different way. It would take too much time just to change the shape of the city to respond to some of the new challenges that we're seeing.

I also want to highlight something else. That we do not want to build a city that has different approaches according to your identity. What I mean is that we do not want a building that has 30 different doors. One for someone with a wheelchair, one for someone with a kid, and one for someone who is blind.

No, you want a building that works for everybody. The same with parks. The same with the transportation system. The same with sidewalks. When we build, we want them to be what we call universal access.

Of course, there are challenges, but the concept should be there because so many things. It's in the advantage of everybody is a society because when you exchange ideas with people, you become more creative and innovation happens. That's an advantage for all of us.

Also, sometimes it helps the everyday life of everybody. Like a mother who has two kids, she needs to go to two different parts. She needs to use two different modes of transportation. How someone deals with that. The vision is always to have a place that works for the majority of the people as much as we can.

Keith: Those are great points. Then, when it comes to something like building a park, let's say, or you're essentially adding a feature or service to an existing city, and you can -- in that sense -- start from the ground up and design that park. You can now start thinking about making it inclusive for all.

How do you do that? How do you center and involve people with disabilities into that process?

Nora: That's basically what it's. What you said is involving people with disabilities. It's the key, and it has to do with dialogue. It has to do with understanding the different needs, and it has to do with the process going to be longer than, as you said at the very beginning, than some will say, "We are going to do this."

It's going to be more useful, and it's going to lead you to a better result. More important yet, we tend to think, "OK, the process is cumbersome. We'll get to something. We'll build that thing." Perhaps the most important is what happens after.

Who's going to take care of this place if no one believes that his or her place no one takes ownership? It's so important that we walk through the full process truly and with intent, not just as a due process, because what we get and how that will take a life of its own will depend on that process.

It's something that has to be repeated all the time. You see that. It's not that you build it and you just leave. People have to take ownership of the spaces so they become alive.

Keith: That's a great point. I love that. To take ownership of it, keep it fresh, keep it going. What are some of the groups that are involved in doing this work?

Nora: My own work is mostly international now. I work mostly in Latin American and Caribbean countries, so that's where I'm most familiar with. The reason why I mention this is I tend to look at more international look.

I have to say that many cities have signed different charters and agreements in support of inclusive cities and making cities successful for people with disabilities. There's something to say about that. It's not a choice, it's a commitment. It's not something that you do because you are nice or because you want to help someone else.

It's fulfilling the right of people. It has to do with what you need to do. It's part of the SDGs, the Sustainable Development Goals. It's part of the UN conventions. There are so many conventions that are requiring this. What I want to say here is that when a city does not do this, they are not complying with what they have to do.

In a way, I always feel that we should not be explaining why we're making places accessible. We should be explaining why they are not accessible. That's what requires an explanation. That should be the no-brainer.

Of course, these should be accessible. Also, there's something to say that this is not a small portion of the population. This is not just a minor refraction or some kind of fringe demand.

The numbers are very difficult to assess, because different countries, different cities measure disability different ways, but for sure, might be a third of the population if you account for all kind of conditions, and their families, and the people who are taken care of.

This is something that should be central to city planning, not just an afterthought, not just something that we do when we have an extra budget.

Keith: If you could design a city or an urban area to be fully accessible, what would you do? How would you even begin that process?

Nora: About the process, of course, it has to do, as I said, inviting and having this conversation among the largest number of people. Having said that, because, of course, the conversation is not enough, there are some principles.

An important thing is to go through the whole life cycle and day cycle. People tend to think, "OK, we're going to design a house that is accessible to someone," but what happens after that? They wake up, they have breakfast, they go out. What happens?

Sometimes, what they say is that you have a place that is accessible, but it's a bubble. One way to think about this is, how do you go through your day? What's happening when you are outside of your house? How do you go to public transportation? How do you go to your job?

How do you go to an entertainment place? How do you meet your friends? Where? How independent are you through whole process? One thing to highlight here, the idea is that people will be more independent in the way that they transit and they enjoy the city.

I would think about that a lot, and then I would think about the life cycle, like how people, at different moments in their life, they have different needs and their household composition changes. We have to acknowledge that.

One of the influences that we typically had in city planning come from the industrial area, in which cities were planned for being very productive and having people going from their houses to the factories.

Then, it was going from their houses to the offices without realizing that there are many other people who are not doing that, but not only that. The way of production changes.

By not including, by not providing services to people who are not doing that, like going back and forth from an office, you are undermining the productive capacity of everybody. It's also about good business. That should not be the main issue. It would be even better for cities. They would have more businesses, more production.

As an example, there are a number of Italian cities which are becoming accessible, so their income rises, because people who are in wheelchairs can visit, and there's a whole push for the tourist industry, for example. Just one of the examples.

Keith: Do you have an example of an experience where planning you were involved in went well, specifically for the disability community?

Nora: That's an interesting question. I have, very recently, published a book which is called "Inclusive Cities." It called "Cities For All." It presents case studies of cities which have done something for making themselves more inclusive.

It was very hard to do this, because there were so many cities that were promising to do things. The hard thing was to see a city that was actually doing it. One of the cases that I liked the most is a case in Brazil, in Campinas, which is next to São Paulo. São Paulo's a huge city, Campinas is a suburban area.

Basically, there was this movement by local mothers who were very concerned about not having places where their kids could play, if they have a disability, with other kids, or with their brothers and sisters, because they were having a big family and they were struggling with, how can they do that?

These mothers organized themselves, and then brought this project to the municipality. They started building these inclusive playgrounds. These playgrounds have different kinds of equipment that could be used by any kid. They have also equipment to do exercise from the wheelchair, like on different positions. They became a program that the city adopted.

The reason why I bring this example is because perhaps it's not the best case, but it's a replicable case. Sometimes, we tend to focus on these cases which are so spectacular, but they're very hard to replicate. I like this case because it's very easy to replicate it. It's a playground, and it's the beginning of something.

As I said, the designs of these spaces are so much more interesting, so much more full of joy, and colors, and textures, and smells. They're an opportunity.

Keith: I love that example. Is there a difference between how you plan for a more urban area versus a rural area? How does that impact disability-centered planning?

Nora: Definitely, there is a difference, and it has to do a lot with the type of technology people have. I'm not saying just big technology, but do people move around in public transportation? Do they depend on their private cars? Are they moving around, going from one place to the other?

For example, in rural areas, especially in low-income countries, people with disabilities do have a very hard time in the sense that some of them are confined to their own housing unit settlements. Perhaps no one has a sidewalk. On top of that, you have a disability, it's very hard.

At the same time, sometimes the community is better organized, in some cases. In some other cases, it's not like that. In cities, public transportation is a very important factor in terms of creating the possibility for inclusion. Something to bear in mind is not just about the system, per se, but how that system connects to the rest of the city and the grid.

By that, it's not enough that you decide a bus that is accessible for everybody. That should be just one part of the whole component of accessibility in transportation system. How do you get to the stops? What happens when you are in that stops? Are all the stops accessible? Some of them are, some are not, so it has to do with the whole system.

Basically, rural areas and urban areas are different, and also suburban areas. That's a big challenge, especially in the US, because suburban areas are more expensive to serve with public transit because of their low density. How do you create a system that helps everybody get to their home if their homes are spread all over? That's a challenge too.

Keith: How did you gain your love for accessible, inclusive planning from your Parks and Recreation job?

Nora: I think it's just about walking around, seeing people use spaces, and see how many different ways are, to see that and realize how limited was my own understanding of public space. It was based solely on my own experience. I have training as an urban designer.

For a while, before starting my PhD, I work with a landscape architect. I work an architect whose name is Martha Schwartz. She's very famous as someone who's very creative. I was realizing then that the more people you want to attract to your spaces, the more creative you have to do with the tools you have.

Then you start including different elements like smells, like sounds, like textures. Then it's more beautiful. The conversation about disabilities sometimes doesn't talk so much about this, but there is an opportunity for beauty, for a different kind of beauty. I think that's something to be celebrated.

Keith: I love that. That's a great answer, great motivation. Finally, what can our listeners do to either learn more about or to advocate for accessible urban development, maybe in their own communities?

Nora: That's a great question. The first thing is behavior. Just acknowledge that there are different people and have some empathy. That's basic, and I'm sure most people do have their front and center, but sometimes we are very much focused on our own issues or big problems. We don't pay attention to that.

For example, when we were in the quarantine and all that, you can tell that some people did not realize that instructions that were given visually or verbally might not be understood by everybody. They're reminded we're all different, and we all have different ways to absorb information and to use that information.

Then I think that we should all advocate at our community level or when we have the opportunity to participate in some kind of municipality or meeting that spaces should be

universal, should be universally accessible. Something to highlight is that no one really knows when he or she are going to need these accommodations.

That's something to bear in mind. We never really know. It could be when we are 150-year-old or it could be a week from now. We do not know. We might meet someone who needs this or a friend of ours might have a friend. It's something that, even if we think that it's not affecting us, it's really close to us, now or in the future. It's even good practice.

Keith: Indeed. Thank you so much, Nora. This has been very interesting and such a complex topic. You broke it down and explained it very well. We appreciate you being our guest today.

Nora: Thank you. It was my pleasure. I congratulate you for all that you are doing and wish you all the best.

Keith: Thank you, Nora, for being our guest on our second episode of Accessibility Outside the Box. We hope you all got to learn something interesting today with us. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast to learn even more next week. We're on all the podcast platforms, Apple Podcast, Spotify, Google, Amazon, YouTube, and more.

You can also find us on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast.

Maddie: Check back next week for our next episode. Thank you for listening to the You First podcast or reading the transcript online. Please email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show to podcast@disabilityrightflorida.org.

[background music]

Woman: The You First Podcast is produced by Disability Rights Florida, a not-for-profit corporation working to protect and advance the rights of Floridians with disabilities through advocacy and education. If you or a family member has a disability and feel that your rights have been violated in any way, please contact Disability Rights Florida.

You can learn more about the services we provide, explore a vast array of resources on a variety of disability-related topics, and complete an online intake on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org. You can also call us at 1-800-342-0823. Thank you for listening to You First, the Disability Rights Florida podcast.

[music]