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DESIRE – Dizajn pre všetkých. Tvorba bývania pre každý vek
(DESIGN for all methods to cREate age-friendly housing)
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Educational material by the Erasmus+ project DESIRE – DESIGN for all methods to cREate age-friendly housing

“Europe is ageing”, the authors write in the introduction to their publication, and this fact poses major challenges in dealing with the fact that more and more seniors will be part of our society. Demographic changes will increasingly make specific demands on how to provide a healthy and caring environment that supports active ageing (for the ‘fresher’ seniors) and enables considerate and sensitive treatment (for the more ‘fragile’ seniors with various forms of mental and physical changes as they age). Of course, it will be important to promote a fundamental change of environment in the context of respect for human rights and preservation of the human dignity of this important target group.

The DESIRE project, of which the textbook/educational material under review is a part, explicitly addresses the challenges of the European Union’s post-2020 ageing policy: “...longer and healthier life is valuable for both individuals and societies, creating new opportunities for the participation and inclusion of older people in economic and social life; ...participation in a range of social activities such as volunteering, sport and hobbies, as well as regular contact with family and friends, tends to have a positive impact on the overall health of older people and prevent their isolation” (Committee on Employment and Social Affairs, 2021). At the project website, the authors also point out that “according to WHO, the health and independence

1 <https://projectdesire.eu/sk/index.html>

of older people depends on the quality of their physical and social environment. Housing is therefore a key condition for active and healthy ageing.”¹

Although the submitted teaching materials are not classical scientific studies and monographs, they are a scientific output, included in the catalogue of outputs. They consist primarily of practical materials, aimed at establishing frameworks for expert learning in the topic addressed and at stimulating subsequent active action by practitioners and experts in the field of design for all, which enables inclusive and age-friendly planning of environments for seniors and senior citizens.

The most important ambition of the authors was to develop in designers and planners such competences (knowledge, skills, attitudes) that will enable them to use the Design4All (Design4All, D4All) methodology in practice. In the publication, the authors explain that design for all is understood as “a tool to ensure the independence, mental and physical well-being and health of older people. The method enables needs analysis and the involvement of end users in the design process (people-centred design)”.² It is critical that professionals whose work affects the design and quality of construction adopt D4All as a natural part of the design process.

We will therefore look at the publication in a broader context and try to describe, at least briefly and episodically, how the project was developed, what its stated objectives were, what content is found in the material, how the material is unique and in which areas it could be improved.

Goals of the project and the team

The stated goals of the DESIRE project include defining the conceptual framework of the DESIRE training programme to complement skills in “Design for All” (D4All) at Vocational Education and Training (VET) and labour market level; developing an innovative training programme on design for all, taking into account the emotional, cognitive and social needs of older people, which will bring new opportunities for the furniture and interior furnishing sector; raising awareness of design for all and age-friendly living as a key prerequisite for active and healthy ageing among professionals and the general public; and last but not least encouraging interdisciplinary interactions and knowledge exchange in the design process between different fields such as science, art and design and ensure the creation of innovative and competitive products and services.³

The project partners which contributed to the development of the material were Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava (STU), Faculty of Architecture and Design, Slovakia; Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology, Slovak Academy of Sciences (IESA SAS), Slovakia; Technological Centre of Furniture and Wood (CETEM), Spain; SHINE 2Europe, Portugal; InnoRenew Centre of Excellence (InnoRenew CoE), Slovenia.

Looking more closely at the modules below, it is clear that they differ – especially in the experience they are based on. The ageing population is moving in the same direction in Europe, the needs and demands that are affected by ageing are similar. However, each of the teams brought something different to the collaboration. The Spaniards draw their experience from the design industry, representing a furniture and design firm; the Portuguese are an NGO that

2 <https://projectdesire.eu/sk/index.html#about>

3 <https://projectdesire.eu/sk/index.html>

deals with adult education; the Slovenians work in the health sector... In Slovakia, anthropologists from the Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences and designers and architects from the Faculty of Architecture and Design of the Technical University, who are part of the project of deinstitutionalization of social services, were involved in the project.



Content of the educational material

In addition to other outputs (learning needs analysis, creation of a platform for archiving DESIRE⁴ content), a common curriculum has been developed, consisting of 6 modules that provide a comprehensive view of several topics. Each of the modules is developed in a clear and structured way and offers a wealth of information to serve as a starting point for experts and practitioners concerned with the topic. Module one provides the introduction to age-friendly and inclusive environments. Module two delves into the ageing process and design. Module three is centred around age-friendly environments in architecture. Module four concentrates on age-friendly environments in interior design. Module five highlights age-friendly product design, and Module six focuses on product engineering.

“Who is this material for and what does it provide?”

Although the readers of the publication are not primarily seniors, it is good to keep in mind that the creation of the physical environment touches each of us directly and to consider whether we have in some way “found” ourselves or our ageing loved ones in the publication. What parts of the material we focus on may be influenced by our role and life stage, during which our demands on living space change not only in terms of accessibility and availability, but also in terms of social inclusion and other aspects.

However, the material is primarily for architects, planners, urban planners and designers, but also for policy makers and decision makers in the public sector, for professionals in the field of social inclusion or health care. It covers the topics studied in such a way as to contribute to their education into qualified experts and practitioners.

It is a comprehensive and wide-ranging publication and is the main output of the DESIRE project. The publication is easy to read because it is clearly structured, visually appealing, with text supported by many exercises, charts, diagrams and photographs; but at the same time, it may be challenging for some of the addressees because it introduces new and diverse concepts and knowledge with the aim of not only learning them, but more importantly, implementing them in real life. Here we are already talking about the possible impact of the publication, which could only be examined in hindsight, through evaluation.

Does the format of the material facilitate and support learning? Does it take into account all the aspects that need to be developed in the target group (knowledge, skills, attitudes) in order to bring about change? Does it cover all the thematic areas where change needs to be achieved?

⁴ <https://projectdesire.eu/sk/index.html>

Regarding the structure of the publication, it would help to make the learning more manageable if the modules were easier to navigate and if the structure of the different parts were more compatible with each other. At the beginning of each module or section, it would be useful to name the learning objectives, define the competences (Gosseling, n. d.) and desired learning outcomes, and add in each section elaborated methods that can be used for learning.

Over 700 pages of text places high demands on the addressees, although this size does not mean that every reader has to work through all the modules. Therefore, a short section to orient the addressees to the publication (not only what each module entails, but potentially for whom it is intended) might have been helpful.

The publication mentions a number of aspects needed to induce change (knowledge, skills), but we know from experience that for behavioural change to occur, it is also necessary to build on attitudes and values that influence motivation. “In psychology, attitude refers to a set of emotions, beliefs, and behaviours toward an object, person, thing, or event. Attitudes are often the result of experience or upbringing. They can have a strong influence on behaviour and affect how people act in different situations” (Cherry, 2023).

The authors are aware of the need to change attitudes as a starting point for behaviour change; for example, the publication mentions the use of empathy-enhancing exercises (exercises offering the experience of constrained movement and leading to a lived experience of how challenging this is for people with specific needs and subsequent sensitization in section 4, Towards human-centred design, 4.2 Empathic and simulation exercises), but there is no explicit mention of how important attitude change is for the acquisition of a particular behaviour.

If we look at whether the publication, in addition to expanding expertise (knowledge, skills), also enables a change in the attitudes of the addressees (developing sensitivity, understanding, freedom from biases and prejudices in planning the environment, which often lead to denial of needs or lack of consideration), we would have welcomed more space devoted to this topic as well, for example, in the form of exercises and methods that would help to sensitise the target group, or get them to see the concept of design for all as an approach that should not only be ‘for all’ in terms of meeting their needs, but also in terms of empowering the co-decision-making role of groups of older adults.

Process as part of learning

A look into the kitchen of the education project teams allows us to see how they identified learning needs, how they set goals, how they created content and how they developed methods and procedures to best convey what the students were to learn and what competencies (Gosselin, n. d.) they were to acquire.

Identifying the content of the modules was helped by the creation of an international guide on the gaps in education and employment skills in Design for All (D4All). An interesting insight into the process was offered by the study *Design for All: A Review of Needs and Gaps in Formal Education in Four European Countries* (Dantas et al., 2023), which aimed to identify needs and gaps at different levels of education and to implement the D4All methods in educational programmes in four European countries (Portugal, Slovenia, Slovakia and Spain).

In particular, an important part of the process was the analysis of the available education and the identification of the so-called education gaps (the education gap defines the space between what learners should know and what they actually know; or between what learners should have available and what they actually have).

Based on a survey of existing materials (desktop research), interviews and workshops, the authors created an educational gap matrix that compares the accessibility and availability of the topic in different fields (Architecture, Design, Health and Social Care) and at different levels of education. The paper manages to capture, through a clear and visually distinct matrix, what topics are or are not reflected in the formal curricula in the participating countries and what should be changed.

In our case, it is positive that the mapping of available curricula was done in a participatory way, with the involvement of different stakeholders.

In examining the impacts, it is possible to go further and look at how in international projects the teams worked together, how they learned from each other and what formative impact the months-long projects and the alignment of different national specificities and cultures had not only on their work, but also on the social learning and on the outcomes of the project. It would also be interesting to see what participation in international and national workshops or conferences with direct interaction brought to the project in shaping the outputs.

Visibility in the public space

While the previous comments were more about process and methodology in the field of education, I would like to dwell on one more topic that relates to content. It is logical that the educational material focuses on the built environment, on the housing stock, on the environment defined by buildings and architecture, because it is in this environment that older adults spend most of their time, because of their specific needs. However, this ‘enclosed environment’ may be the very thing that binds them together. In the case of available and accessible environments, let us think of seniors living outdoors – in the backyard, in the park, in the garden, in front gardens or even in streets and squares, simply in public spaces. What I miss among the modules is the module on ‘Age-friendly environments – urban planning and public spaces’. It is the realm of public spaces that forms the interface between indoor and outdoor space, between public and private, between solitude and community living.

“If a city perceives and maintains its open spaces as a system, then spatial synergy and a higher quality of life can easily occur.” (Miková, Paulíková, Pauliniová, *Eds.*, 2010: 11). Public space can be seen as the living room of a city or village; it often becomes a catalyst for life. Intense social interactions lead to an increased sense of community and promote inclusion and friendliness of the settlement, especially in relation to groups that we often consciously or unconsciously segregate. Squares and streets stimulate networking, but also the exchange and communication of information and direct communication with others. Think of old people on benches who are happy to address someone, children who easily find playmates in playgrounds, or teenagers and their dating on the promenade. Coupled with this is the need to plan space to enable connections; to prepare attractive activities and to encourage the vitality, diversity and social sustainability of the town or village. Accessibility and availability of public spaces is also important – one central square or park is not enough, everyone should have a variety of places within reach where they can spend their time (Miková, Paulíková, Pauliniová, *Eds.*, 2010: 11).

However, it is not only about improving the physical quality of life, but mainly about a social and political change in planning that will turn the invisible into the visible, the unimportant into the important. The French philosopher Jacques Ranciere stresses the relationship between the right to be visible and the shape of the social system. “Spatial

exclusion is an essential dimension of social exclusion. Whoever has the right to be publicly present is a rightful member of society. Whoever ceases to seek this right resigns his existence in society.” (Miková, Paulíková, Pauliniová, *Eds.*, 2010: 12).

The better the different spaces are connected, the more the principles of design for all are built into urban planning and architecture, the more visible the elderly people will be and the clearer it will be that we are remembering all those who are part of our society...

In any case, the extensive and innovative material is a great contribution and I believe it will become a fundamental methodological starting point in shaping such an important area as the creation of environments for all ages.

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