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Article

Rethinking Accessibility as a Cultural Generative Ecosystem

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Abstract

The paper presents a theoretical reflection on accessibility, developed through dialogue between an architect and a philosopher. It explores the cultural horizon of a polysemous discipline whose conceptual boundaries remain fluid, and examines the role accessibility can play in creating a freer and more inclusive society. Framed as a *cultural generative ecosystem*, accessibility is presented not merely as a regulatory requirement, but as a dynamic and transformative process rooted in humanistic values. The paper highlights its potential to counter diversity-related discrimination, promote empowerment, and guide the transformation of human habitats in line with people's needs and expectations. At the same time, it acknowledges the objective and cultural challenges involved in cultivating an accessibility-oriented mindset. Following a comprehensive introduction that outlines the broader conceptual framework of accessibility, the paper identifies six conceptual determinants that define its complexity in the built environment, with particular attention to public open spaces and disability. These determinants—polysemous, contextual, multi-scalar and relational, corporeal and spatial-temporal, multi-criteria, and multidimensional—offer a framework for rethinking accessibility as a generative principle of inclusive urbanism and human dignity.

Keywords: accessibility; cultural generative ecosystem; conceptual determinants; built environment; disability; urban space; inclusion; human dignity

1. Introduction

1.1. Purpose and Structure of the Paper

Accessibility is commonly understood as a technical and regulatory discipline that aims to remove architectural barriers hindering access to resources for people with disabilities. Although this narrow approach is necessary, it risks overlooking the cultural, ethical, and spatial dimensions of inclusion. This paper therefore proposes a broader conceptualisation, positioning accessibility as a cross-disciplinary body of knowledge primarily oriented towards realising human rights and mitigating discrimination arising from the diverse expressions of the human condition. In this perspective, accessibility is not merely a matter of compliance, but a strategic and ethical tool for shaping inclusive environments, particularly in urban contexts, where spatial, social, and cultural barriers often intersect, and where planning, design, and policy-making play a pivotal role in promoting equity and spatial justice [1–3].

To articulate this perspective, the paper is structured into two main parts. The first explores the purpose and mission of accessibility, emphasising its social role and humanistic foundations. It introduces the notion of accessibility as a *cultural generative ecosystem*, a dynamic and evolving framework of values, practices, and relationships through which accessibility operates as a transformative force. It is not merely a condition to be guaranteed, but a source of social and cultural innovation. As such, accessibility becomes a process involving multiple actors, evolving and adapting over time, and generating new practices, languages, and tools that improve participation and

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inclusion. The second part identifies the elements that shape environmental accessibility as a distinct and evolving field of study. It introduces and briefly describes six interrelated conceptual determinants, illustrating the theoretical and operational complexity of the subject.

This paper does not present empirical findings, but instead offers a theoretical synthesis intended to inform future research, guide planning practices, and inspire inclusive design strategies.

1.2. Conceptual Background

Accessibility means the condition or characteristic of a thing, person or concept of being *accessible* [4]. The adjective "accessible" derives from the Late Latin term *accessibĭlis* which means "affording access, capable of being approached or reached" [5]. It usually highlights positive and socially acceptable characteristics, although it is sometimes open to interpretative duplicity (e.g., "accessible person", "accessible territory", etc.) until it assumes a negative meaning, with reference to what may cause offence or harm to all or specific categories of people (e.g., drugs, firearms, pornography, alcohol, etc.).

Rather than having a single, fixed meaning, accessibility functions as a multifaceted prism that reflects diverse priorities, sensitivities, and disciplinary perspectives. In environmental studies, for instance, a geographer might define accessibility as the ease with which a location or service can be reached [6]; a transportation planner as proximity, measured by travel time, to primary activity nodes such as the CBD, retail centers, and educational institutions [7]; whereas an urban economist may interpret it as a strategic factor in business location decisions, considering proximity to markets, infrastructure, and labor resources [8].

Accessibility influences all human activities, the use of material goods and the intangible aspects of life, for example communicating with others or participating in social life; it also has a myriad of variations: accessibility to information, social accessibility, cultural accessibility, digital accessibility, economic accessibility, accessibility to health, accessibility to education, accessibility to common assets, geographic accessibility, environmental accessibility, etc. Each variation reflects specific relational dynamics between individuals and their environments, particularly within urban contexts where spatial configurations shape everyday experiences.

From a broader perspective, accessibility emerges as a foundational value in the life of every human being. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone comes up against access problems and experiences the subtle discomforts or great suffering of feeling excluded while shaping their life's project. Therefore, whenever there is no need for targeted support strategies, accessibility should not give rise to special policies or interventions, rather it should inform ordinary decision-making processes concerning human relations, knowledge systems and the transformation of anthropic space [9]. In other words, accessibility should not be an afterthought, a goal pursued through additions, adjustments, and compromises after general decisions have already been made. Instead, it must be embedded in those decisions right from the outset [10].

This need arises at all levels: from the creation of the laws and institutions underpinning society to rules and regulations in the fields of employment, education, health, tourism, construction, etc. The design process provides an apt metaphor: accessibility is often considered too late, as a regulatory requirement only, once the fundamental design choices have been finalised. Consequently, accessibility measures are often added to projects in a way that is disconnected from the original design intent, both functionally and semantically. This approach risks perpetuating exclusion by treating accessibility as a corrective measure rather than a generative principle of social justice and inclusive design.

1.3. Accessibility as a Form of Human Care

The concept of accessibility, as we know it today, was established along with modernity when, in the early 17th century, there was a shift from the physics of qualities to the physics that would pave the way for the use of mathematics in the quantification of the physical world. As a result of this shift, science abandoned the obscure language of magic and took the language of mathematics

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as its *metron*, enabling the transmission of knowledge which becomes accessible simply because it can measure, explain and reproduce physical phenomena. The inaccessible and essentially secret knowledge of the magician or alchemist thereby gives way to a new attitude which, from the Galilean physics, has conceived adequate systems to comprehend nature and considers the clarity of ideas as an ideal of knowledge. It is the method of mathematics which can make the world accessible, because it guarantees a full control of the registers of communication and allows to verify every phase of progress of scientific knowledge.

Thanks to this epistemological shift, modernity has placed human beings at the centre of the world, but it has not succeeded in making the built space an ideal enlivened by the human dimension and experience and replacing the tension towards spatial separation with the tension towards social inclusion. Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* is the symbol of classical perfection, the expression of man's perfect nature in harmony with the Earth and the Universe. This ideal man – a metaphor for the "standard man" (an average healthy adult) with respect to whom the great process of the anthropisation of the world has taken place and is taking place – does not reflect the multiform expressions of the person marked by a plurality of individual, social and environmental specificities, and does not embody a relational world that unfolds through the discipline of freedom.

It can be said that environmental accessibility is the continuation conducted with the means of architecture of the philosophical effort of promoting a *personalist* worldview, the philosophical vision founded on *liberation*, through – in the words of Mounier [11] (p. 61) – the "personalization of myself and of my world". Accessibility is not a freedom offered to men, it is a conquest of the spirit of freedom, which is "indefatigable in tracing and regaining lost liberties. i.e., in dealing with situations in which one is delivered up like an object to the play of impersonal forces." [11] (p. 62). Any anthropic interference on the world must be conceived and carried out bearing in mind two exigencies: building revolves around humankind and what is built must not compromise nature irremediably. In other words, *ars aedificandi* enjoys anthropologic values which make the architect promote freedom.

From this philosophical standpoint, accessibility is a form of care for others. By preparing the world to welcome everyone, it contributes to overcoming an individualistic view of the world. In urban environments, this principle translates into inclusive design practices that proactively embrace human diversity and foster belonging, shaping spaces that reflect the pluralism of lived experience. Accessibility corresponds to the universal instinct of sociability and shares with nature the drive to overcome everything that stands in the way of it achieving its design. It is, first and foremost, an expression of the recognition of differences and tension towards inclusion. [12] (pp. 41-62).

The background to accessibility is the philosophical conception of the ego as a such, from the Delphic exhortation "know yourself" (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) up to the personalist philosophy of the 20th century, the first reality we are invited to make accessible to ourselves. We are not simply thrown into the world; we are carefully welcomed into it. From birth, the world is made accessible to us. There is a maieutic dimension to those who prepare and arrange the built space for each of us, making our ego and what surrounds it accessible.

This anthropological lens invites us to view accessibility not as a fixed standard, but as an open system that evolves with human complexity. As Edgar Morin points out [13] (p. 233) – "Il est tonique enfin de considérer le monde, la vie, l'homme, la connaissance, l'action comme systèmes ouverts". Even in the field of accessibility it is important to recognise the "vérités polyphoniques de la complexité" [*ivi*], paving the way for a new culture that respects boundaries while seeking to overcome anything that prevents or hinders human fulfilment. Accessibility can be achieved not only through the transformation of the habitat, but also through the transformation of human beings. Eliminating obstacles does not flatten reality; it simply enables us to navigate it at the different speeds at which we all move along life's journey. This dynamic and adaptive approach reflects the essence of a cultural generative ecosystem, where accessibility becomes a living process of care, transformation, and co-creation.

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1.4. Accessibility as a Tool for Pursuing Human Rights

Accessibility is increasingly recognised as the set of enabling conditions that allow individuals – particularly those facing discrimination based on factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, health status, cultural background, religious beliefs, or economic circumstances – to fully exercise their citizenship rights and pursue their aspirations. This evolving understanding reflects a shift from static definitions to a more dynamic and systemic perspective, in which accessibility is shaped by the interaction of diverse actors, disciplines, and environments. In urban contexts, such conditions manifest through spatial, infrastructural, social, and institutional arrangements that facilitate access to resources.

The following is a brief overview of three fundamental human rights – freedom, social inclusion, and equal opportunities – which not only benefit from accessibility but also serve as essential preconditions for the realization of other rights, such as education, participation, and health.

1.4.1. Accessibility and Freedom

According to Wurman [14] (p. 45), "Access means the liberty to take advantage of resources". As it is necessary to know the qualities of a 'resource' – that is, an available medium that supports the fulfilment of human needs, tangible and intangible – in order to purposely use it, Wurman's definition could be supplemented as follows: "Accessibility means the ability to understand the meaning and functioning of a resource and the freedom to use it" [15].

The desire for freedom is not abstract but is always related to a specific circumstance. Sartre wrote [16] (p. 489), "**there** is **freedom only** in a **situation**, and there is a **situation** only through **freedom**". Moreover, it is not possible for anyone to achieve an absolute freedom that makes everything accessible. More realistically – as the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier [17] asserted – we can aspire to a "liberté sous conditions" which is affirmed by experiencing it with others and for others.

In the world, an element reveals itself as an 'obstacle' only when it stands in the way of the achievement of a goal, of meeting a need, only when it limits freedom of choice or makes it difficult or impossible to enjoy a resource. Only then does this otherwise generic and neutral element become an obstacle. A language I don't speak – Mandarin, for instance – poses no problem until I need to use it for a job interview, to read a document, or to visit China. A mountain is just part of the landscape unless I attempt to climb it without the necessary equipment, skills, or experience. Likewise, a train only becomes an obstacle to my work or holiday when I'm unable to use it.

Accessibility is both a personal and collective endeavour to remove obstacles (physical, cultural, economic, social, technological, etc.) that limit people's freedom of choice; it is (or should be) the result of the commitment of a multitude of actors (intergovernmental agencies, state organisations, local authorities, social institutions, community facilities, informal networks) to make resources available to as many people as possible. In the difficult and never-ending process of negotiating our body's relationships with the environment, the task of accessibility is to intervene in the environment in order to foster processes of bodily adaptation and mitigate person-environment conflicts.

A resource made available is conceptually assimilated and gradually becomes something that is no longer detached and polarised. From being a hieratic and precluded entity, it becomes a familiar entity that can become an opportunity to promote the human potential that could not otherwise be expressed and raise the social capital of a community.

When it enables the expression of personal freedom that has been denied or coerced, accessibility expands social opportunities, knowledge and human creativity and becomes both an enabling tool for people and a collective asset [18]. For example, the most accessible environments encourage more people to actively participate in public life, overcome loneliness and mitigate stress [19] and make their contribution to the growth of society and our understanding of the world [20,21]. In this way, people themselves become the 'resources' for processing and transferring values and knowledge.

1.4.2. Accessibility and Social Inclusion

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Difficulty in accessing resources, combined with "inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power" [22] (p. 105), represents a key driver of *social exclusion*. Levitas et al. [23] (p. 21) define social exclusion as "a complex and multi-dimensional process (that) involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole." Social exclusion lies at the root of poverty [24–26] and represents a dominant framework for analysing social inequality [27], democratic sustainability, and the resilience of contemporary societies, particularly in relation to emerging global challenges such as climate change, population ageing, migration, and technological advancement [28].

Accessibility is a powerful tool for social inclusion [9], a founding principle of *civitas*. Like inclusion, accessibility is not a legally sanctioned fact of life, a 'product', but rather a 'process in evolution'; that is, it expresses tension towards an objective, rather than the objective itself. This process usually presupposes an initial conflict between different people and interests and moves towards policies and actions aimed at promoting people's autonomy and self-determination, expanding knowledge as well as employment and social opportunities. In urban policy, it translates into adaptive strategies that reconcile competing interests, redistribute spatial resources and promote inclusive governance frameworks. The interpretation of accessibility as a process is evocatively confirmed in the etymology of the verb "to access" (from the Latin *ad* + *cedĕre*) which means "to go towards" [29].

1.4.3. Accessibility and Equal Opportunities

Inclusion is not just a response to the challenges posed to human interaction by various contexts, such as environmental, technological and cultural ones, but rather the patient search for connections between individual experiences and the broader horizon [30]. In the same way, accessibility is not a technical solution to diversities – which belong to nature and are a defining characteristic of humanity [31,32] – but it is an efficient tool to combat diversity-related discrimination. Accessibility aspires to make a relational life possible between inequalities and injustices; it is the justified hope that diversity will not consolidate into blind oppositions but will model a culture of inclusion where people always come first.

Within the sphere of diversity-related discrimination, disability-related discrimination is one of the most difficult to address as – according to the Italian jurist Benamino Deidda [33] (p. 12) – it "goes beyond the dimension of ideology or the regulatory framework and is rooted in the material dimension". "(…) daily life – he wrote – "is not hindered or prevented just because you are black or a woman. You can move about, eat alone, organise protests or go to the cinema. (…) If most people could agree that black people have the same rights as white people, the problem would be solved. If one day we agreed that women should have the same starting positions as men and there would be no differences in salary or career, the problem of gender discrimination would be solved. But this is not the case for the disabled. (…)".

To overcome disability-related discrimination, unfortunately good laws are not enough, starting with those to enter the labour market [34,35], nor is it enough to overcome the stereotypes (behaviours, languages, practices, etc.) that create cultural marginalisation [36,37]. Problems rooted in the 'material dimension' of life, in body-space-time relationships and preventing access to resources need to be addressed [38,39]. And this is far from easy, given the distinct needs of each person with a disability, the adaptive challenges they encounter across diverse environments, and the boundless variability of human habitats. This challenge is particularly acute in public spaces, where spatial barriers and infrastructural limitations often intersect with social and cultural exclusion.

Beyond the rhetoric and slogans that often accompanies discussions on inclusion and slogans ("cities for all", "mobility for all", "tourism for all", "museums for all", etc.), unfortunately it is highly unlikely that one day there will be a world entirely free of architectural barriers [19,40,41], while it is

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easy to suppose that "many arenas or resources will never be fully accessible for all without escorts or personal assistants to accompany people with various impairments" [42] (p. 281).

As the presence of architectural barriers will unfortunately continue to hinder the social inclusion of people with disabilities, it remains essential to implement strategies and policies that support and empower them in developing environmental adaptation skills. In short, it is about strengthening *agency*, the capacity of people with disabilities to take an active role in shaping their own identity and destiny [18,43]. In this regard, empowering individuals through training and spatial awareness plays a crucial role. This is not only a matter of personal autonomy, but a cornerstone of inclusive urban development. For instance, Orientation and Mobility (O&M) courses can significantly enhance blind individuals' spatial awareness and personal autonomy by developing key competencies such as cane techniques, environmental sign recognition, spatial conceptualisation, and geographic orientation skills [44].

2. Discussion

The above observations highlight the fact that accessibility cannot be reduced to a mere technical issue, but must instead be understood as a complex, multidimensional ecosystem shaped by a variety of tangible and intangible factors that interact in dynamic and reciprocal ways. To corroborate this view, it is helpful to outline the theoretical boundaries of the field of investigation and identify the *conceptual determinants of accessibility*, namely, the foundational aspects that characterise the discipline, guide its practices, and define its design, social, and cultural implications.

This conceptual framing is particularly relevant in urban contexts, where accessibility intersects with spatial justice, inclusion policies, and the lived experience of diverse user groups. Exploring the theoretical structure of accessibility opens up new perspectives on how environments might be designed to better support human rights.

2.1. Accessibility Domains

Accessibility as a goal is a relational phenomenon that goes beyond the domain of built places to attain a more suitable community dimension that welcomes and belongs to people who relate to each other beyond the dialectic of opposites. The accessible space is the privileged place of mutual recognition where, in a construction site of relations enlivened by *thought-in-action* [45], people grow, at different paces, interacting with each other, with the environment and with things.

Ortega y Gasset's famous expression "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" ["I am I and my circumstance"] [46] (p. 45), effectively highlights the reciprocal influences, the inextricable web of relationships between a person and their living environment. If it is true, as Ortega y Gasset claimed, that an individual's personality is not a reality in itself, but exists only in relation to the world that surrounds it and the things and relationships it is made up of, then an unsuitable living environment not only hinders or prevents activities from being carried out, but also influences the formation of a person's authentic Self, the formation of their personality.

Accessibility arises, therefore, at the confluence of three domains: (1) the *person*, (2) *society*, and (3) the *environment*. It depends on multiple characteristics and the quality of their interactions [47].

Personal characteristics may include: the level of education, health conditions, disability, functional limitations (permanent or temporary), types of person-environment interfaces used, family structure, availability of economic resources, and innate abilities. According to scholars of Intersectionality, access to resources worsens when multiple social identities and the related discriminations are combined in one person, for example being disabled and poor; being a woman and of colour [9,48–50].

Social characteristics pertain to the institutional, political, cultural and economic context. Among these, the following play an important role: a welcoming attitude, tolerance towards others, the social representation of diversity, the competence of the social actors in matters of inclusion, and the availability of social networks and services.

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As far as environmental characteristics are concerned, the following can be mentioned: the transport and public services system and the territorial features, urban settlements, the public space and buildings that form the backdrop for human activities.

2.2. The conceptual Determinants of Environmental Accessibility

Accessibility is a complex and multifaceted field of study, from which certain aspects (conceptual determinants) emerge as particularly significant. Focusing on disability, one of the key areas of diversity, the following six determinants are proposed as those that, , according to the authors, most influence accessibility in the built environment:

1. Accessibility as a polysemous concept: recognises the plurality of meanings of the term, avoiding reductionism;
2. Accessibility as a contextual concept: highlights that accessibility depends on socio-spatial and cultural variables;
3. Accessibility as a multiscale and relational concept: introduces the territorial dimension and the interactions between actors, places and policies;
4. Accessibility as a corporeal and spatial concept: recognises accessibility as an embodied and situated experience, mediated by the body and its dynamic relationship with space;
5. Accessibility as a multi-criteria concept: asserts that accessibility must be assessed according to a plurality of interrelated requirements;
6. Accessibility as a multidimensional concept: integrates the different dimensions of human experience in space (physical, communicative, cognitive, emotional, organisational).

Together, these conceptual determinants reveal the layered nature of accessibility and its entanglement with space, time, culture, and human diversity. From this theoretical framework emerges a broader reflection on the meaning and value of accessibility in contemporary society—one that invites us to reconsider how we build, relate, and understand.

2.2.1. Accessibility as a Polysemous Concept

Accessibility is a *polysemous* concept, as *each person* reads, interprets, judges and contributes to defining the accessibility of a place, asset or service (hereinafter "place", for narrative simplicity) based on their own structural and contingent characteristics and needs. This concept reflects Plato's subjective and relativist interpretation in the *Theaetetus* of Protagoras of Abdera's famous fragment of a sentence: "Man is the measure of all things". As people differ from one another, each person interprets and judges a given phenomenon from their own point of view [51]. This view also aligns with the Capability Theory, which emphasises that each individual differs in terms of personal characteristics and the social and environmental circumstances they experience [31,32].

It can be said that even though all human beings share the same nature and rights, every human being is unique. A human being is like a point in a sphere. In a sphere, each point is equidistant from the centre and has no qualitative differences from the other points. Yet, each point, occupying a specific position in the sphere is different from all the others. A sphere, therefore, is an effective spatial metaphor for society.

In the design of policies, programmes, plans and projects aimed at people in general, however, it is customary to classify people who have something in common into social groups (*user groups*). A society understood as a composition of social groups can be represented by a polyhedron. The more sides this polyhedron has (the more refined the classification), the more it will asymptotically tend towards the sphere. The granularity of classification should reflect the specificity of the goals pursued.

The social categorisation, which is rooted in Linnean taxonomy, always offers a simplified (when not misleading) representation of reality. In his analysis of classic epistemology, Foucault [52] asserts that there are realities which do not give in to the attempts of manipulation of *mathesis*, and whose presence in our intellect requires an empirical inquiry, thus revealing what the universality of

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concepts fails to grasp. It is not uncommon to observe how the same scenario can offer dissimilar accessibility conditions not only to people from different user groups (e.g., adolescents and elderly people; people with mobility impairments and people with visual impairments), but also individuals within the same user group. Paraphrasing a famous saying attributed both to Stephan Shore (for autistic people) and Tom Kitwood (for people with dementia), it can be said that when we meet an adolescent we are not meeting 'adolescence', when we meet an old person, we are not meeting 'old age', when we meet a disabled person, we are not meeting the 'disability'. We are only meeting individual people.

Another three qualities of accessibility derive from polysemy: *relativity*, *recursiveness* and *non-measurability*.

Accessibility is a *relative* notion as neither the built space, nor knowledge or anything else can be thought of as absolutely accessible to everyone and/or in the same way. Moreover, as has been observed, what might be accessible to one person might not be to another. The concept of architectural barrier does not have an absolute value. "Architectural barrier" is the name that we give to elements and circumstances that hinder or prevent – for everyone, groups of people or specific people – an action or the achievement of a goal. Michelangelo's Grand Staircase in the Laurentian Library in Florence is a masterpiece of architectural history and one of the highest expressions of human genius in art. It would make no logical sense to consider it an architectural barrier. Nonetheless, the staircase 'becomes' an architectural barrier when it prevents a person from visiting the Reading Room and admiring *de visu* the wooden ceiling and plutei, the polychrome stained-glass windows or Tribolo's red and white terracotta floor.

Even judgement regarding the accessibility of a place, with the exception of checks on regulatory compliance which takes the binary form of 'up to standard'/'not up to standard', cannot be defined in an absolute sense, as an environmental quality that is there or is not there. Each person, on the basis of his or her abilities and prior and contextual knowledge, forms an opinion about the accessibility of a place and judges for himself or herself whether, to what extent and in what way he or she could use it. The reliability of this opinion is closely linked to the quantity and quality of the information available. Between the *de jure* assessment (which answers the question "Is this place accessible?") and the subjective assessment (which answers the question "Can I access this place?") is an assessment based on the *degree of accessibility* (which answers the question: "For a certain user group, what level of autonomy does this place permit?") [53]. For each user group, degrees of accessibility are a concise expression of appropriately defined levels of qualitative satisfaction related to the level of personal autonomy that the environment permits. For example, with reference to people in wheelchairs, the degree of accessibility of a place might be: (i) *high*: accessible independently, (ii) *medium-high*: accessible independently with some difficulty, (iii) *medium*: accessible with assistance in limited situations, (iv) *medium-low*: accessible with a caregiver, (v) *low*: accessible with difficulty even with a caregiver, (vi) *none*: not accessible.

Accessibility is *recursive* as it is the expression of an endless process. Several factors underlie the need to periodically renew and analyse the accessibility assessments of a place and constantly implement the necessary actions to gradually improve its performance. For instance: (1) the ongoing transformations that shape human habitats—through a variety of actions and processes—as well as individual and collective behaviours, both voluntary and involuntary; (2) the increasingly refined analysis of user groups, from which new needs emerge and are gradually incorporated into regulatory frameworks; and (3) the advancement of scientific and technological research, which continuously provides designers with new opportunities and operational tools—ranging from digital infrastructures and communication platforms (ICTs) to adaptive systems capable of learning and contextual interaction (AI), thereby expanding cognitive and sensory capabilities of the users [54,55].

As accessibility has too many dynamically changing variables, *it cannot be measured* in quantitative terms. The geographer Peter Gould [56] (p. 64), who only had to deal with environmental variables, recognised that "Accessibility… is a slippery notion… one of those common terms that everyone uses until faced with the problem of defining and measuring it!". When human variables

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are also introduced, when there is a shift from the abstraction of the average healthy adult to 'real people', things become enormously complicated [57,58]. While there is general awareness about the complexity of environmental scenarios, the same cannot be said for the individual user groups. What is defined as a "user group" is merely an intellectual construction, a world made up of multiple frameworks. Each framework is populated by people who have things in common and who express specific needs in their interaction with the environment and specific requests in terms of accessibility. Taking visually impaired people as an example, a distinction must be made between the blind and the visually impaired. With regard to blind people, there is an essential difference between people who are congenitally blind and those with acquired blindness. For both sub-categories, account must be taken of the type of support used while travelling (caregiver, long cane, guide dog, electronic aids, etc.) and the level of training in orientation and mobility (whether they are self-taught or have successfully followed specific training courses). Other 'effective' variables could be introduced, for example age and the coexistence of other functional limitations.

In conclusion, it is necessary to accept the irreducible complexity of human beings. Reality is far more complex (and interesting) than it appears. Despite the laudable attempts made [59], there is no quantitative metric that can measure accessibility. As Sen wrote [60], quoting Carveth Read, "Even when precisely capturing an ambiguity proves to be a difficult exercise, that is not an argument for forgetting the complex nature of the concept and seeking a spuriously narrow exactness. In social investigation and measurement, *it is undoubtedly more important to be vaguely right than to be precisely wrong*." [our italics].

2.2.2. Accessibility as a Contextual Concept

Accessibility is *contextual* because, although the underlying principles are universal, the cultural approach as well as the operating solutions to achieve such principles are strongly constrained by the overall characteristics of the action scenario. Even this paper reflects the cultural perspective of its authors. Scholars from different cultural traditions or epistemic frameworks may, upon reading it, encounter conceptual or terminological elements that appear dissonant or even conflicting. Due to environmental, economic, social, cultural or technological obstacles, an effective solution to overcome an access problem in a certain context may prove to be inadequate or even impractical in another context. For example, in countries where the per capita income is less than 1 dollar per day and where, above all in rural areas, the roads are often uneven and muddy, a traditional wheelchair is not only an aid unavailable to most paraplegics, but it would also be unsuitable for the characteristics of the road surface. It would soon break and be difficult and expensive to repair [10,61]. The role of the context is pivotal even when working at a site that has particular historical-artistic value, where overcoming access problems usually requires ad hoc solutions that are respectful of the building's historical and symbolic meanings and capable of achieving a balance between protecting the essence of the asset as a witness to the past and the usability of the spaces it encloses and the assets it houses [62].

This connotation of accessibility opens up a reflection on the concept of standard and the appropriateness of solutions to raise the autonomy of disabled people when working in contexts where resources (human, economic, social, information, etc.) are scarce or particularly valuable. More generally, it serves as a reminder that the context plays an essential ordering role in policies and interventions for accessibility and filters and conditions their effectiveness.

2.2.3. Accessibility as a Multi-Scalar and Relational Concept

Accessibility ranges from the product to the region, spanning all scales of intervention. With a variety of priorities, aims, methods and operating tools, accessibility informs the work of the ergonomist, designer, architect, territorial planner, landscape architect and geographer. *Multi-scalarity* highlights the need to see accessibility in *relational* terms. Each environmental element is a link in a chain of relations, a hub in an interconnected network. If one of these links or hubs has access problems, it compromises the accessibility of the entire system. For example, a pedestrian crossing

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that is considered dangerous (because it is too long, there is too much traffic, it is not adequately lit at night, etc.) can for many people represent a break in the pedestrian mobility of a neighbourhood, a barrier that prevents access to entire parts of the urban fabric. It is therefore necessary to develop an overall vision that can connect environmental elements effectively: from residences to the city, to the region. To this end, a public transport system inspired by accessibility principles plays a strategic role [63,64].

2.2.4. Accessibility as a Corporeal and Spatial-Temporal Concept

Accessibility is a privileged lens through which to explore the interplay between human activities and the spatial-temporal fabric of everyday life, but also to introduce the dimension of the body into the reflections on person-environment interactions [65,66], to cultivate the relationship between the body and the environment also when the body struggles to recognise itself in the environment and interact with it [67].

The time that is unnecessarily wasted on physically connecting the different spaces of life is, to all intents and purposes, a *barrier* [68]. A barrier that often generates fatigue and discomfort, in addition to frustration. For those waiting in line for a long time to receive a service at a public office or enter a museum, waiting time is a barrier. The discomfort can of course become much more pronounced in the case of elderly people or people who struggle to maintain an upright position for a long time. A similar discomfort is experienced by people who are forced to wander from one part of the city to another to deal with a bureaucratic matter or take their children to school. Intervention strategies to improve the use of time and mitigate inconveniences in the person-environment interaction may relate to management (reducing unnecessary mobility and favouring online services and the home delivery of documents; slightly staggering school opening times; extending the opening hours of public offices that provide services to citizens; improving booking services; improving personal training; etc.) or they may be environmental (improving the transport system and complementary mobility equipment; limiting inconvenience in waiting spaces by providing adequate equipment and furniture, the surface treatment of walls, the colour, lighting; ect.).

2.2.5. Accessibility as a Multi-Criteria Concept

Accessibility is *multi-criteria* because it is expressed through the coherent and comprehensive fulfilment of a number of environmental and technological requirements in relation to each other. For instance, accessing a place first and foremost presupposes the possibility of identifying and reaching it. Identifiability is the first link in the chain of information that defines how communicative a place is. Reachability, along with urban and suburban mobility, plays a strategic role in plans, programmes and projects that aim to raise the accessibility of the urban and territorial spaces. In this sense, it should be viewed in relation to both public and private means of transport and complementary mobility facilities (public transport stops, parking spaces and parking bays for private vehicles, signage, etc.). Reachability can also concern the parts of a building, such as real estate or environmental units. Once inside a place, accessibility implies the possibility of understanding it in symbolic, spatial and functional terms, the possibility of being able to navigate it and use it autonomously, in conditions of comfort and safety, and, lastly, the ability to take advantage of the human and environmental resources that characterise and guard it. Within the class of accessibility requirements, it is useful to make a distinction between the requirements, often underestimated, that pertain to accessibility *to* a place (identifiability, reachability and 'external' mobility) and all the others, inherent to the accessibility *of* a place (usability, intelligibility, orientation and wayfinding, 'internal' mobility, comfort, safety of use, provision of furniture and equipment, cleanability, maintainability, etc.).

2.2.6. Accessibility as a Multidimensional Concept

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Accessibility concerns both material assets and processes, such as spatial perception, communication, training and organisation, as well as behavioural aspects, such as how the host deals with the needs, concerns and emotions of the guest. Among the different dimensions of accessibility, we can identify some that are particularly relevant in strategic programming, planning and design activities: (1) *physical*, (2) *communicative*, (3) *cultural*, (4) *emotional*, (5) *socio-economic*, and (6) *organisational*.

The physical dimension of accessibility pertains to actions aimed at overcoming physical access problems. The communicative dimension is based on complex sensory-perceptual dynamics, and concerns initiatives and actions aimed at increasing orientation, recognition of sources of danger, and the intelligibility of places and services. The cultural dimension is the 'door' to knowledge of the material substance of a place, its cultural and symbolic values and the human expressions that have historically characterised it. The emotional dimension involves the affective responses that environments elicit in individuals, including feelings of safety, comfort, dignity, and belonging. It concerns the capacity of spaces to make users feel welcome and reassured, and to support them in their emotional and psychological experience, particularly in situations of vulnerability, uncertainty, or stress. The socio-economic dimension is linked to the positive consequences that more accessible environments can bring about in the life of communities. The organisational dimension pertains to the broad theme of the management of services that enable a building to function properly over time.

The dimensions of accessibility may vary in magnitude depending on the user group and action context. However, as they are closely related to each other, they must always be thought of in an integrated way, as parts of a whole [69].

3. Conclusions

These notes show that accessibility seems to be a fluid, elusive and complex notion. Complexity is an inescapable quality of accessibility. It must be taken as a given. A sectoral, technical, or deterministic approach risks falling into naïve reductionism, distorting the concept and preventing it from fully expressing its potential.

We need to move towards a complex idea of reality, where what is being discussed – including people – must not be thought of as an entity that is not aligned with the 'norm' (*a world apart*), but as an expression of human nature (*a part of the world*), as something that is 'ours', as the Roman playwright Terence said: "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" ['I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me']. Making the world around us more accessible allows us to recognise our own life in others, sharing an otherwise foreign experience.

Accessibility thereby becomes an epistemological corrective that opens up new horizons of knowledge about all of humanity and, more specifically, the part of humanity that encounters specific difficulties in enjoying the original good that is common life. A human "second nature" is also constructed in this way, a generative context that confirms the value of human dignity and infuses ethics into the art of building.

The absolute artifice that is the city must open up to *real people* in order to create opportunities, experiences, culture and beauty and, if possible, transcribe social relations into the me-you language, even when "you" is an expression of human vulnerability [70]. In this sense, accessibility can be seen as the connective tissue of a cultural generative ecosystem, an evolving framework through which spaces, practices, and relationships are reconfigured to affirm human dignity and foster inclusive urban life.

It resembles the altar dedicated to an unknown god who might knock at any time in our lives to add new value to an urban reality increasingly made in the image of man.

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