

# A systems perspective on Disability Accessibility

## Background

This issue of CRAFT has sought to engage **Six Dimensions of Disability Accessibility (DA)**. I was invited to provide an “integrative systems’ perspective, at least at policy level, not abstract strategy, but coherent cross-sector policy recommendations” ... hmmm... sounds easy... no worries!

Hearing my concerns about my lack of detailed understanding of the system involved in the provision of Disability Access we discussed that perhaps I would consider a 600 word introductory article, and offer to provide reflections after reader responses were compiled at some later point.

This sounded good, as my preference would be to convene a multi-stakeholder facilitated workshop that sought to interactively map out a systems-based collective understanding of the current system, and its perceived weaknesses; and *then* build on that by exploring the viability of suggestions for interventions based on collective wisdom – after all, people need to own the systems they comprise, and the co-design of alternatives they can commit to enabling!

Anyway, despite those guidance instructions, I found myself drawn into the topic, and what you see below is my starting contribution. It is informed by work I have done over several years with my friend and colleague Dr Richard Mochelle on whole systems transformational work.

It is also based in part on work I was invited to participate in last year in trying to establish a Global Brain Exchange with the Cure for Life Foundation (founded by Dr Charlie Teo). The Global Brain Exchange was a bold venture to change the existing paradigm. You will possibly note some similarities with the Disability Access issue. The approach they took was to bring together a global microcosm representative of all those involved in brain cancer – patients, survivors, families, surgeons, researchers into prevention and treatment, patient advocates and so on. A two day intensive DesignShop run by Matt and Gail Taylor generated several working groups, and I was nominated the convenor of the ‘Collar’ Working Group – aiming to help provide the overarching/ underpinning common collaboration principles to enable safe and trustworthy engagement in mutual effort, globally. It was a very humbling and powerful experience given the high stakes.

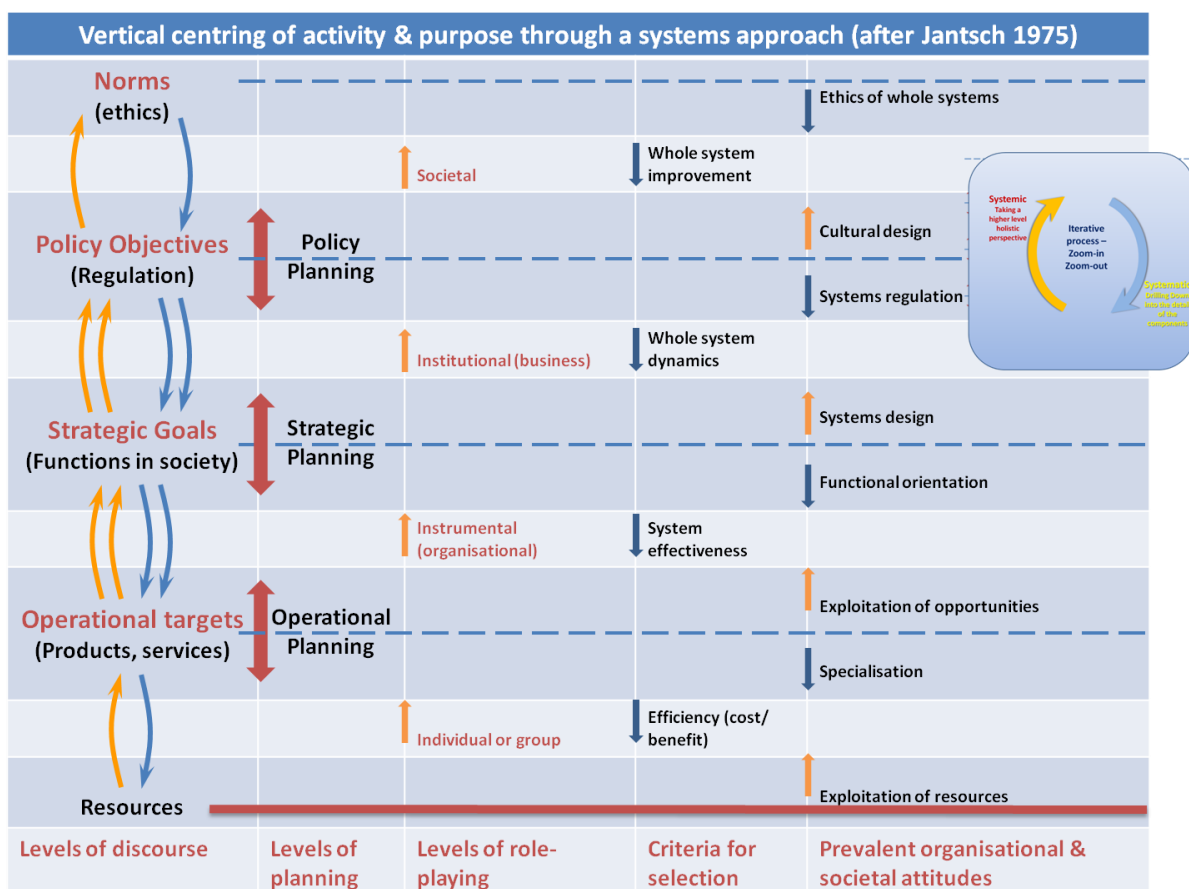
Bearing in mind that I am not well-acquainted with this field of Disability Access (nor brain cancer!) please read this contribution as a humble attempt to help frame how stakeholders *might* choose to see things through different lenses, and *might* decide to come together to have deliberative dialogue about what they might do together that they cannot do alone. No criticism of individuals or agencies is intended – if you see that in my words, perhaps you are projecting your concerns... I would welcome the opportunity to co-facilitate any

gathering of stakeholders interested in exploring the issue/s more deeply, using these sorts of systemic frames of reference, and/or others.

## Introduction

My non-expert starting assumption is that disabled persons' best interests require the **Six Dimensions of Disability Accessibility** to be treated and enabled as an integrated/holistic system. Consequently I have framed my contribution around them, re-ordered them to enable exploration through a couple of different systemic lenses, and incorporated them in the text below.

Firstly, before we consider potential policy suggestions, perhaps it is useful to explore the bigger picture. The diagram below is a way of seeing iterative relationships across different levels of thinking, and I have found it transferable to many issues/ focus areas. All of the 'levels of discourse' are nested in and affected by whatever 'prevalent organisational and societal attitudes' exist at a particular time – i.e. the Norms (ethics) of the whole system influence all other levels of societal attitudes and actions. You might have experienced that people differ in their opinions based on what they think they are trying to achieve, and the 'level of role playing' they perform. In my experience, often people rewarded (e.g. paid) to act at one level are incentivised *not* to consider higher whole systems' ethics – look no further than the asylum-seeker issues in Australia at this time...



Consequently, if we aim to improve the 'whole system', we must attempt to get the norms (ethics) right, before writing and administering policy. The highest levels of ethics/ norms ought to aim to effectively address *universal* harms for *universal* benefit.

## Addressing Universal Harms in our Universal Interests

As we mature we learn that disability could have affected any one of us from birth, and could *still* affect us at some future point in our lives—it is a human condition. I would regard ‘Disability’ then as (potentially) a *universal* harm, and addressing its causes and symptoms as in our *universal* interests.

Mature and capable individuals recognise that Universal Interests lie in enshrining rights for persons with disabilities, as the ***UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*** has since May 2008.

*“The Convention...[aims to] change attitudes and approaches to persons with disabilities... from viewing persons with disabilities as "objects" of charity, medical treatment and social protection towards viewing persons with disabilities as "subjects" with rights, who are capable of claiming those rights and making decisions for their lives based on their free and informed consent as well as being active members of society.”*

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150>

The Convention’s intention to change attitudes, toward recognising and empowering ‘subjects’ rather than treating ‘objects’, starts at the ‘whole system ethic’ level in Jantsch’s diagram. It also parallels trials in other more localised human health systems. Such approaches seek to engage microcosms of whole ecosystems of players, including those previously regarded as ‘objects’.

Various approaches and social technologies can be employed to bring diverse groups together around common (universal?) interests. One such example is called ‘the art of hosting’, which helps enable systemic change through mutually respectful engagement.

In *From Hero to Host: A Story of Citizenship in Columbus, Ohio*, Deborah Frieze and Margaret Wheatley (2010) suggests that:

*“Like Linux, the Art of Hosting is order without control. Its “source code” is a set of core principles and practices for how to host conversations that matter: setting intention, creating hospitable space, asking powerful questions, surfacing collective intelligence, trusting emergence, finding mates, harvesting learning and moving into wise action”*

[http://berkana.org/berkana\\_articles/from-hero-to-host-a-story-of-citizenship-in-columbus-ohio](http://berkana.org/berkana_articles/from-hero-to-host-a-story-of-citizenship-in-columbus-ohio)

Such an approach requires that participants drop competitive egos and vested interests to welcome others to work with them in trust – requiring a shift from heroes to hosts – and “to be exemplars of all this within all our practices consistent with the Art of Hosting Principles

*and Practices*<sup>1</sup>.” It requires participants to *be fully present as people with universal interests*, asking ‘what can I bring’, not necessarily attend as representatives of the vested interests of the institutions that pay them, asking ‘what do we get?’. Is this occurring, and, if not, *could* this occur in Australia...?

As the UN Convention site continues:

*“The Convention is intended as a human rights instrument with an explicit, social development dimension. It adopts a broad categorization of persons with disabilities and reaffirms that all persons with all types of disabilities must enjoy all human rights and fundamental freedoms. It clarifies and qualifies how all categories of rights apply to persons with disabilities and identifies areas where adaptations have to be made for persons with disabilities to effectively exercise their rights and areas where their rights have been violated, and where protection of rights must be reinforced.”*

<http://www.un.org/disabilities/default.asp?id=150>

Again it sets the overarching ethical intent to enable *individual* agency in influencing *systemic* outcomes. This appeal to our Universal Interests in Human Rights to Dignity also relates to what I would regard as the overarching *Dimension* of Disability Access, the universal acknowledgement of:

1. **Individual DA: ensure rights and dignity as human beings whether or not ‘differently abled.**

Yoland Wadsworth says this very nicely. She suggests that in all our endeavours we should all essentially *“Be very human: be first and foremost people resourcing and facilitating each other’s inquiry and co-inquiry to create living human systems for the benefit of all”*<sup>2</sup>

Importantly the ‘*Hero to Host*’ shift requires going *beyond* an *individual* (heroic?) pledge of service—such as the Hippocratic Oath, or the Physician’s Oath—toward an agreed mechanism (hosting?) for trustworthy collaboration across different individuals, entities, cultures and philosophies. This will necessarily build on multiple individual commitments—for personal commitments to do the right thing are still essential—yet require a shift in focus to extend them to generate consensual group dynamics and a co-constituted agreement of system-ethical intentions – i.e. *co-create and maintain relationships that **do no harm** to the whole system.*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.artofhosting.org> The art of hosting is fairly new and a very healthy addition to the growing field of collaborative processes. DesignShops (MG Taylor) are another approach specifically designed to use the emergent and adjacent ideas that arise from within the group while also compressing time and realizing specific short and long range goals necessary for changing a complex system

<sup>2</sup> *Building in Research and Evaluation – Human inquiry for living systems*, Yoland Wadsworth, 2010, p.141

I will explore how we might establish a working/ collaborating microcosm of stakeholders and players below. However, first we ought to explore society's systemic responsibilities, in the context of the starting set of Six Dimensions of DA.

If we accept the overarching ethic as per the **UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** then we can see that there are systemic responsibilities at the whole of society level. Relating these to the Six Dimensions I would suggest that they look something like this:

### **Society's systemic responsibilities**

2. *Sociological DA: demonstrate intent (law/ governance) and extent (concrete expression) of societal embrace of DA/ensure economic capability of society to express DA in concrete terms/and provide and enforce laws, statutes and bylaws requiring societal responses to DA.*

This requires making sure sufficient resources are set aside to enable all the functions AND that persons in positions of influence lead by example in the articulation of societal responsibilities.

3. *Governance DA: include Disabled Persons in decision-making processes, particularly in decisions about them viz. 'no about me without me'.*

This requires inclusive processes AND that persons in positions of influence lead by example in the inclusion of Disabled Persons AND that Disabled Persons *become* persons of influence.

4. *Linguistic DA: ensure integrity and inclusiveness of language used*

This requires taking time to codefine discourse ethics and communications in readily understood and agreed language to ensure inclusivity.

These three Dimensions could be regarded as the responsible actions of a society that ensures equal rights of inclusion and participation of Disabled Persons in the codesign of the governance system as called for by the UN Convention, i.e., the overarching 'whole system ethic'.

Now the systemic *architecture of intent* is in place we can consider society's physical capabilities to deliver real places, technologies and outcomes for the day-to-day benefit of Disabled Persons.

### **Physical System Capabilities**

5. *Physical Disability Accessibility (PhysDA): society's technological capability to design, fabricate and provide 'concrete' outcomes of DA in buildings, housing and transport etc*

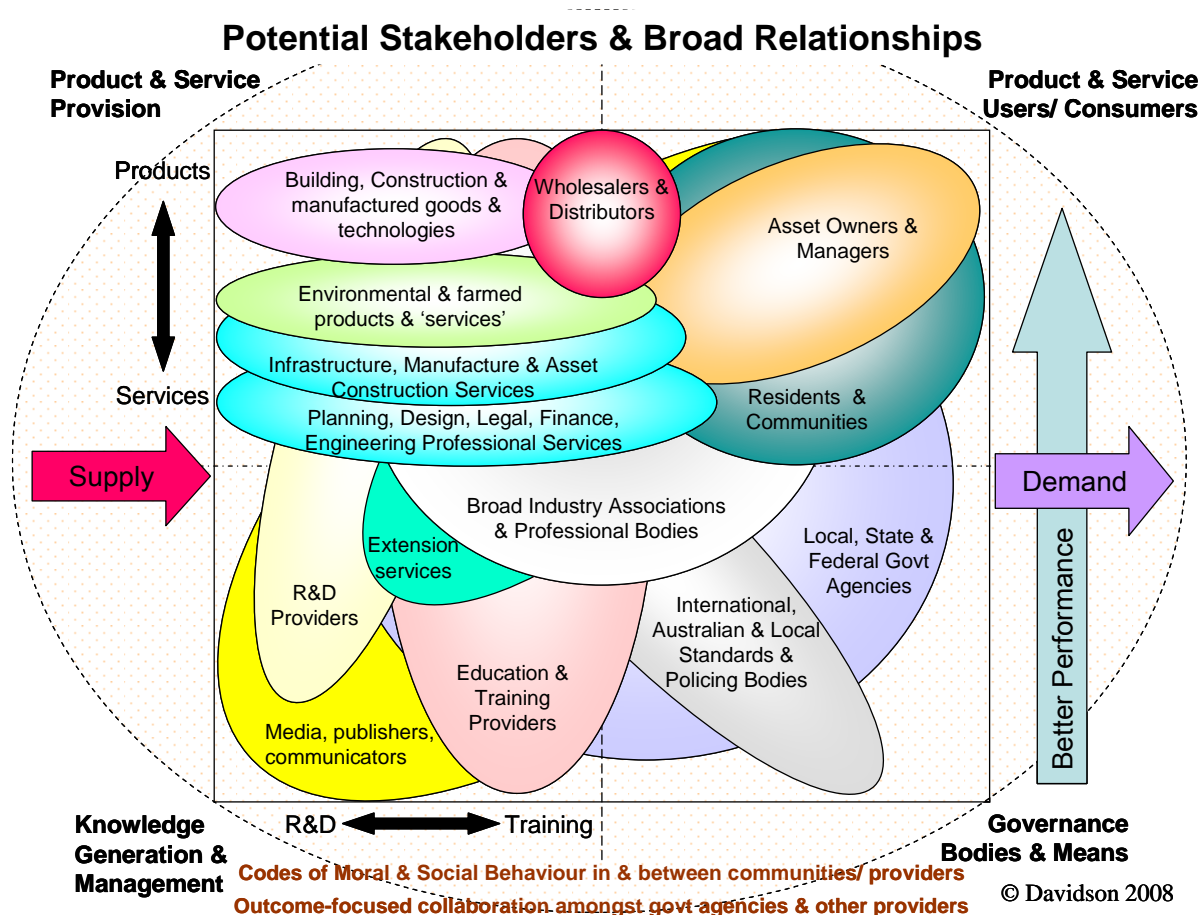
Like another area that languishes, sustainable design, there is little question that we have the skills and physical capacity to design, fabricate, build and refine 'concrete' outcomes for

DA – the questions are more related to political will, resource allocation priorities and consistency and cohesion across multiple (often competing) players.

Now framed within the whole system ethic of the UN Convention, and *Society's systemic responsibilities* as articulated above, we are left with a question:

If we *are* to transform the way the system operates mutually-beneficially, who or which agency would become the trusted host, catalyst, and facilitator for individuals and organisations in the system, allowing self-organisation, collaboration and engagement based on common objectives and values?

This in turn invokes an inquiry as to who comprises the ecosystem of players, and whether and if so how they relate to each other. I would suggest that those closer to an understanding of the current 'system of players' could relatively easily co-develop a system map similar to the example below (note, this is an indication only as it was derived for a different topic of interest):



The size, shape and representation of each player can then be refined; initially one-on-one in conjunction with each player, and then collectively, until agreed as a true/ best representation of the 'stakeholder map'. Current (and alternative *future*) relationships can also be indicated as arrows signifying 'flows' (e.g. of resources/ knowledge/ money etc) amongst them. When these 'flows' are laid out in a straight line they become 'value chains'



and where they overlap or have common hubs, these comprise ‘value nets’ with often more than one pathway to achieve the same objective – provided the system is allowed to self-organise, rather than be constrained in a particular fashion.

Vincenzo De Florio is involved in trying to improve aged care systems in Europe and suggests that a Mutually Assistive Community<sup>3</sup> will deliver faster more efficient and equitable outcomes:

*“The mutual assistance community... [in] most tele-care organizations ... people are divided into classes: primary users (i.e., elderly or impaired people in need of assistance); secondary users ( professional providers of care, e.g., doctors and nurses); and tertiary users (society at large). This artificial classification limits the effectiveness of optimally recombining the available assets into an effective and timely response to requests for assistance. Furthermore, this classification into an active part of society, able to contribute with worthy services, and a ‘passive’ part only on the receiving side is already a source of discomfort for people that are thus brought to feel they were once part of a society that now confines them to a lesser state and dignity. The mutual assistance community (MAC) is a social organization that avoids such classification... the users are just members of a community...”*

So, if the above suggestions are followed at some point in the future as a means to explore alternative ways of enabling Disability Access, how will we know whether or not we have accurately mapped the system, or identified places where alternative approaches, policy or design interventions might be worth considering?

Ultimately I believe this will come down to the lived experience of Disabled Persons, as empowered players IN the system they help co-create, and will be reflected in the final of the Six Dimensions we started with, i.e., the *confidence* of affected individuals in ‘the system’:

6. *Psychological Disability Accessibility (PsyDA): Disabled Persons’ confidence in the veracity, efficacy, reliability and societal respect of DA to effectively empower their agency in achieving their greatest potential.*

Will achieving this not be the *true* measure of an effective system for Disability Access?

If you think the above approach could be worthwhile attempting with a broad range of stakeholders please contact CRAFT. I would be humbled to be invited to assist co-facilitation of a resourced effort in whatever role I might be of value, as a keynote listener, synthesiser and integrative systems thinker.

Yours sincerely, Neil Davidson ([neil.davidson6n@optusnet.com.au](mailto:neil.davidson6n@optusnet.com.au))

1<sup>st</sup> August 2014

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<sup>3</sup> *On the Constituent Attributes of Software and Organizational Resilience*, INTERDISCIPLINARY SCIENCE REVIEWS, Vol. 38 No. 2, June 2013, 122–48 Vincenzo De Florio