

# Designing an Inclusive Parliament

Respecting people and architectural heritage

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## Abstract

The Brazilian Parliament is a 150.000 m<sup>2</sup> architectural complex, designed by the world-wide known architect Oscar Niemeyer in 1958, in Brasilia, Brazil. Its architecture, as Brasilia itself, is an international reference to Modernist Movement in Architecture. The main challenge faced by designers responsible to maintain and adapt the building complex to present demands is: how to make this huge and important architectural complex accessible and intelligible to everyone, according to national codes on accessibility and international standards on inclusive design, without affecting the symbolic and cultural value of this important architecture? How to make it inclusive, respecting people and architectural heritage?

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# 1. Related Legislation and Statistics

According to IBGE statistics (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), based on a 2000 year survey, there are 24,5 million disabled people living in Brazil. From those, 42% refers to severe disabilities (10,2 million). Considering that Brazilian population is estimated on 180 million people, we conclude that approximately 14% of the population is considered disabled.

Fortunately, the issue of disability and inclusiveness on Brazilian legislation has been gaining strength since the National Constitution in 1988, where specific topics are dedicated to the right of disabled people and consequent duties of government and public administration.

From the very beginning of the 1988 law, the issues citizenship and human dignity, for example, are placed among the National Constitution Fundamental Principles. That, we believe, is the basis for the whole approach towards social inclusion of disabled people.

From text of 1988 Constitution, one can highlight the following topics:

Article 7 – XXXI: prohibition on any discrimination on salary or admission criteria;

Establishing competences for Union, States and Districts:

Article 23 - II: health, public assistance and protection to disabled people

Article 24 (...) XIV: protection and social inclusion to disabled people

Article 37 (...) VIII: by law, public administration should reserve a percentage of job vacancies on civil service to disabled people;

Article 203 (...) IV: rehabilitation for disabled people and promotion of their inclusion on community;

Article 208 (...) III: special education preferably on inclusive schools;

Finally, regarding inclusive design and accessible spaces, the articles 227 - § 2º and 244 can be considered as a preliminary reference and starting point to several codes, regulations and norms that would be published thereafter. According to that paragraph, the legislation should define codes and construction rules related to urban design and architecture of public buildings and design of public transport, committed to accessibility and inclusion of disabled people.

One year after the Constitution promulgation, it was approved the federal law 7.853 (October, 24<sup>th</sup>, 1989), establishing general rules to guarantee individual and social rights and effective citizenship to disabled people. It also created the CORDE – National Coordination for the Integration of Disabled People, as a federal committee responsible to evaluate the implementation of public policy towards issues of disability and social inclusion, defined as priority for public administration. Regarding architecture and public spaces, this law reinforces and regulates the principles established on Constitution.

Ten years later, the decree nº 3.298 (December, 1999) is sanctioned, establishing the National Policy for the Integration of Disabled People, consolidating previous laws and

codes. It is clear, from this point, the perspective of inclusion and integration, instead of distinction or segregation. According to this law, buildings and public spaces should be adapted or designed to be accessible to everyone. After that, laws were approved with the same objective and more recently (December, 2004) it was sanctioned the decree nº 5296, defining among other things, deadlines for public building adaptation. According to that law, that should be done until 2007. Unfortunately, the same deadline was established when the 1999 decree was sanctioned and until now, most public spaces still present problems on accessibility and inclusion for disabled people.

Regarding specifically codes about accessibility for buildings and public spaces, the main technical reference is the Brazilian Association for Technical Norms (ABNT). The technical norm nº 9050 (reviewed in May, 2004) defines precisely the minimum dimensions for corridors, furnitures, equipments, signage, staircases, elevators, etc. By law, all buildings should be designed or adapted according to those standards.

## **2. Brazilian Parliament Program for Social Inclusion of Disabled People**

The issue of accessibility and social inclusion, from the last couple of years has been faced as a matter of priority by the Brazilian Parliament administration. For several reasons:

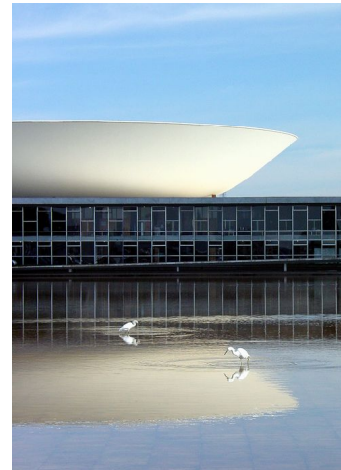
1. It is the institution where the laws are proposed, discussed and approved, including all the federal laws about accessibility;
2. Because of its political role on society - "the people's house", as it is known - where the social demands of the country are discussed, it is frequently and massively visited by citizen from a wide variety of origins, purposes, abilities and, most of all, disabilities;
3. The Brazilian Parliament is a political and administrative reference to other governmental and non-governmental institutions. So, initiatives implemented there, tend to be followed by others;
4. Because of the legislation applied to civil service staff admission, stimulating social inclusion, there is an increasing number of staff from Brazilian Parliament with some kind of disability;
5. Deadlines defined by federal legislation for public buildings to be properly adapted.

For all those reasons, it is expected from the Brazilian Parliament to be an example to be followed. Consequently, in 2004 it was launched the Social Inclusion Program for Disabled People. The main purpose of the program is to create, develop and implement an internal policy towards social inclusion of disabled people who need to get in contact (physically or virtually) to Brazilian Parliament environment. It is a broad initiative that

involves several departments, dealing with issues as architecture, transport, signage, internet, radio, tv, human resources and so one.

### 3. Brazilian Parliament Architectural Complex

The Brazilian Parliament is a 150.000 m<sup>2</sup> architectural complex, designed in 1958 by the world-wide known architect Oscar Niemeyer, as inherente part of the plan for Brasilia, the capital, the modernist city designed by urban planner Lucio Costa.

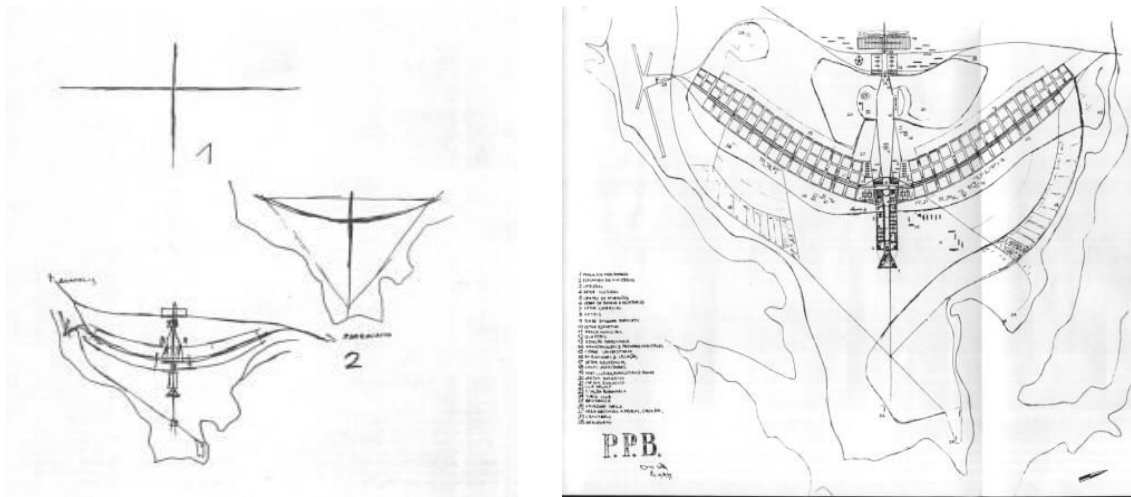


Views from the Brazilian Parliament Architectural Complex

Brasília itself is an international reference, considering the fact that it is the only city in the world completely planned, built and actually functioning according to modernist urbanist principles. But it goes beyond the traditional modernist ideas, as defined by Lucio Costa:

“It should not be envisaged merely as an organism capable of performing adequately and effortlessly the vital functions of any modern city, not merely as an urbs, but as a civitas, possessing the attributes inherent to a Capital. And, for this to be possible, the planner must be imbued with a certain dignity and nobility of intent, because from that fundamental attitude spring the sense of order, fitness and proportion which alone can confer the desirable monumental quality on the urban scheme. Not, let it be clear, in the sense of ostentation but as the palpable and conscious expression, so to speak, of what is worthwhile and meaningful. The city should be planned for orderly and efficient work, but, at the same time, be both vital and pleasing, suitable for reverie and intellectual speculation, it should be such a city as, with time, could become not only the seat of government and administration, but also one of the more lucid and distinguished cultural centers in the country” (Lucio Costa, 1957).

The city was first conceived in a simple way: “It was born of the primary gesture of one who marks or takes possession of a place: two axes crossing at right-angles; the very sign of the Cross”. One (north-south) is the residential axis, while the other is the monumental (east-west) axis. The intersection between the axes, where the city gets denser, is dedicated to services and offices.



Left: original sketches – conception of Brasília. Right: proposed plan.

Brasília is a manifesto, an utopy that is converted into reality. An urban reality that sometimes contradicts the original purposes of the city conception. It is an ideal design which keeps struggling against speculative spreading and out of control urbanisation.

In this context, the Brazilian Parliament (the Congress) is a monument. It is probably the main architectural symbol of the capital, marking the monumental axis at the east edge. It is located at the Plaza of the Three Powers - with Government House and the Supreme Court occupying the base of the triangle and Congress at the apex.

Gradually, as the democratic process was solidifying and the legislative process getting complex and more participative, the congress urged for space, so that new buildings were added. Nowadays, only in the main architectural complex, there are five buildings, which

are visited by almost 30.000 people daily, a population that is bigger than most of the Brazilian municipalities.

## 4. Adapting spaces: towards an inclusive architecture

The main challenge faced by designers responsible to maintain and adapt the building complex to present demands is: how to make this huge and important architectural complex accessible and intelligible to everyone, according to national codes on accessibility and international standards on inclusive design, without affecting the symbolic and cultural value of this important architecture? How to make it inclusive, respecting people and architectural heritage? Facing this challenge, the Brazilian Parliament started in March 2004 the Social Inclusion Program for Disabled People that includes projects and activities in which architecture plays a fundamental role. The first results of the program are expected to be presented by 2006, including the main architectural interventions of public spaces. The architectural accessibility plan is established to be developed according to three steps: **diagnosis, designing and maintenance**.

The **first step** is a **comprehensive diagnosis** about the actual conditions on accessibility of architectural spaces. Each room, corridor, bathroom, elevator or staircase of each one of the five buildings which form the main architectural complex are being analysed according to national codes on accessibility. The main product of this diagnosis will be a **data-base** where spatial data will be linked to updated information about patterns of **accessibility, access and escape routes, use and occupation and pedestrian movement**, to be analysed through a **GIS platform**. The main goal is to **understand and visualise accessibility problems** in order to **better define design priorities**.

The **second step** is composed by a set of complementary and interrelated **design actions**, based on **priorities** established through the diagnosis, complemented by **emergent demands**. In this aspect, the **focus is being inclusive, not exclusive or special**. Accessibility, in this case, is not seen as an additional feature added to building, exclusively to disabled people. **It is to be intrinsic to its architectural design**, to be enjoyed by everyone. The **concept of accessibility**, in this case, involves issues like **intelligibility, sustainability and safety** (access and escape routes). Design, in this sense, it is not simply restricted to adding ramps or handrails. It is to be understood as **part of a huge re-evaluation of principles and behaviour**. Regarding national codes on accessibility, they are not simply applied to design, but their concepts are analysed and its application is evaluated case by case, according to architectural heritage principles.

**Maintenance** (of space and principles) is the third step. In this stage, previous activities are evaluated and process is renewed with new diagnosis and new design actions, as a virtuous circle. It is important to stress that, simultaneously to the whole sets of architectural plans, complementary actions have been implemented, related to staff training, web accessibility, inclusive information (adapting Brazilian Parliament Radio, TV and webpage to allow access by visually impaired and deaf people). Finally, we believe that **allowing people to access and feel comfortable through the architectural environment of Brazilian Parliament, we are respecting their right to properly exercise citizenship**, specially considering what society expects from Brazilian Parliament, considering its political role as house of representatives: a model of social inclusion to other national government and non-government institutions.

## 5. Inclusive Solutions

At the Architecture Section of Brazilian Parliament we have had the opportunity to work on the following design principles: (1) inclusive approach, wherever it is possible; (2) prototypes as a way to test solutions; (3) user participation on design evaluation, specially the disabled user; (4) connecting accessibility to intelligibility, citizenship. At the same time, some challenges are faced, as the usual lack of sensibility on society about the disability issue.

Regarding the architectural heritage preservation, it can be faced at the same time as a problem and an opportunity. Naturally, there are limitations related to the need of preservation that restrict architectural solutions and space adaptations. On the other hand, that restriction allows some kind of flexibility, when dealing with national standards on accessibility. By law (Normative Documents on Heritage Buildings and Accessibility - Institute for the National Historical and Artistic Heritage – IPHAN), design solutions which intend to make public spaces and building accessible should respect their intrinsic historical characteristics. In these cases, the codes, rules and norms should be followed with some flexibility, keeping in mind the principles behind the numbers. That is the main approach we have implemented, when dealing with the national codes on accessibility. Wherever it is possible, we follow the rules strictly. But when that rule means affecting the architectural heritage, we change the focus to the principle behind the rule (inclusion, autonomy, visibility, security), proposing alternative and specific solutions and dimensions. This exercise of interpreting the codes according to its principles can be useful in the future, as a basis to review the standards previously established by law, creating a necessary and constant system of evaluation. Naturally, we are always keeping in mind the general idea of inclusion and accessibility related to dignity and humanity.

So, considering the complexity of situation, diversity of demands, restrictions related to architectural heritage and user dynamics, the main decision on design approach can be resumed on one word: inclusion. In this sense, instead of developing special solutions to be used by special groups of people, we try to connect accessibility to issues like intelligibility, sustainability and security. We have noticed that demands originated on accessibility usually are related to other related spatial problems. So, facing a problem on accessibility can be faced as an opportunity to present solutions related to the general quality of the environment.

The wide inclusion idea applied to design is not only related to address the wider variety of people needs, but also to a variety of architectural demands that can be object of design solutions, even when the original problem is too specific.

Finally, through this approach, we are creating inclusive and whenever it is possible, universal design. Therefore, many problems that affect only a small part of the community might generate solutions that will improve the architectural quality of the environment for all users without distinction.