Truly cities for everyone?

A debate on urban planning and accessibility from the perspective of people with visual disabilities

Associació Catalana per a la Integració de les Persones Cegues

Barcelona, june 2026

INDEX

Truly cities for everyone?

How we blind people orient ourselves and move through urban space 2

A more rights-guaranteeing regulatory framework and growing social awareness. 5

The single-level mixed-use street, an urban planning model that has become generalised 7

Accessibility in the design of projects 12

Walking along the pavements 13

Accessibility to transport 16

Spaces for the practice of physical exercise 17

Parks, gardens, natural spaces 18

Play areas and beaches 18

Access to information and heritage 21

Participation model 22

Conclusions and proposals 23

Truly cities for everyone?

A debate on urban planning and accessibility from the perspective of people with visual disabilities

Within the framework of the Barcelona 2026 World Capital of Architecture, from the Associació Catalana per a la Integració de les Persones Cegues, ACIC (Catalan Association for the Integration of Blind People) —a grassroots organisation which for more than thirty years has worked so that accessibility is a present and effective vector in urban planning policies and proposals, in transport and in access to information, culture and the world of work— we consider it appropriate to set out, by way of notes, some considerations that may enrich a necessary, rigorous and often too silenced debate on the extent to which accessibility is an essential element in the urban planning projects that design the Barcelona of today and tomorrow. To focus this debate, this document seeks to answer a simple but clarifying question: is today's Barcelona a more accessible, more inclusive, more truly-for-everyone city than the post-Olympic Barcelona of thirty years ago, at the time when the city underwent significant changes and when we, as a grassroots organisation, began our path?

This question does not seek a simple and closed answer, but rather seeks to open a profound debate which, far from easy proclamations and propagandistic slogans, challenges the political and technical officials responsible for urban planning projects, the professional and academic world, the media and the various social movements in the field of people with disabilities and neighbourhood organisations. We understand that the event of the World Capital of Architecture, which fills Barcelona this 2026, is an appropriate framework for this debate to take place and to allow us to gradually define urban planning models that configure cities more truly for everyone.

Obviously, we are fully aware that all the reflections and considerations we make in relation to the city of Barcelona are perfectly transferable to the reality of the rest of the country's cities and to many other places in the world. The specific territorial characteristics and social dynamics of each city will require general considerations and proposals to be specified in relation to each particular reality. This specification must also take very much into account the reality of smaller urban centres if we are truly moved by the objective of drawing a well-structured country.

The dialog on accessibility is interwoven, when we are speaking of urban planning models of great impact, with other elements that strongly intervene —sustainability, mobility, the

social fabric, the model for the use of public space, etc. The will to seek a model that fits together diverse needs and perspectives requires an effort of design and planning which, in no case, may leave in the background —as has often happened— the guarantee of universal accessibility for the supposed benefit of other priorities.

We therefore ask that the institutions, bodies and persons with responsibility for the urban design of our city —and of all the cities of the country— assume the challenge of debating in depth the question that we place on the table with this document. Opening this debate is our purpose, and these considerations and reflections that we propose here are our contribution. We hope to be able to analyse and debate openly and calmly the aspects that define our position, our answer to the question we propose, and in this way to take advantage of the opportunity offered to us as citizens by the Barcelona 2026 World Capital of Architecture so that, from now on and without any kind of doubt, universal accessibility becomes a determining vector of any urban planning project.

The answer that we give to this question from ACIC is necessarily nuanced: Barcelona today has a more advanced regulatory framework and greater social awareness of accessibility, but certain urban transformations of recent decades have significantly reduced the autonomy and safety of blind people in public space, and this must invite us to deep reflection.

How we blind people orient ourselves and move through urban space

In order to understand why certain urban designs can favour or seriously hinder the mobility of blind people, we consider it appropriate first to explain how we orient ourselves and how we move. A blind person does not move “groping” nor does he or she advance only by avoiding obstacles in an improvised way. Autonomous mobility is based on the constant construction of a mental map of the environment, on the identification of stable references and on the interpretation of tactile, auditory, kinaesthetic and spatial signals that allow us to know where we are, where we are going and which space is safe for circulation.

In this process, the white cane, as a mobility support, is an essential tool, but it does not act in isolation. The cane makes it possible to detect changes in level, physical limits, textures, low obstacles, walls, facades, urban furniture or irregularities in the pavement. The feet also provide relevant information, because they allow us to perceive differences in level, slopes, materials, different pavements or tactile strips. Hearing is equally decisive: the sound of traffic, the reverberation of buildings, the presence of open or closed spaces, acoustic traffic

lights, transport public-address announcements or ambient noise help to interpret the configuration of space. Spatial memory, body orientation, the direction of travel, the continuity of the facade line, the regularity of pavements and the predictability of urban organisation are also important.

For this reason, the elements that most favour orientation are those that offer clear, constant, detectable and coherent references. The physical separation between pavement and carriageway, by means of a perceptible difference in level, has traditionally been a fundamental reference, because it makes it possible to distinguish safely the pedestrian space from the vehicle circulation space. The facade line is also a very useful reference when it is free of obstacles, because it makes it possible to maintain a straight and predictable route. Well-located pedestrian crossings, audible traffic lights, correctly designed tactile paving, guidance and hazard warnings strips, railings, guide plinths, braille or raised signage, clear public-address information and the orderly arrangement of urban furniture are resources that facilitate autonomy and reduce the need to ask for help.

However, these elements are only really useful if they respond to standardised, understandable codes applied coherently. A tactile pavement cannot mean one thing in one street and a different thing in a station, in a square or in a facility. A blister strip must indicate warning or danger; a directional strip must indicate guidance; a differentiated texture must have a clear function; and the separation between spaces must be capable of being interpreted without ambiguity. If each project uses different solutions, if materials change without criteria, if tactile pavements are installed in a more decorative than genuinely functional way, or if references do not follow a common logic, the blind person cannot interpret the space safely and is forced to act by trial and error, with the risk that this entails.

The importance of standardised codes is therefore central. Accessibility does not depend only on there being some tactile element or some specific resource, but on these elements forming part of a shared, stable and reliable urban language. In the same way that drivers interpret traffic lights, vertical signs, road markings and lanes because they respond to a common code, blind people need the tactile, sound and spatial references of the city also to respond to a coherent system. Without this code, the environment becomes uncertain; with this code, the city can be read, anticipated and travelled through with greater autonomy.

This need is especially relevant in the new urban models that eliminate traditional references, as happens with many single-level streets. When the difference in level between pavement

and carriageway disappears, the blind person loses essential information that previously allowed him or her to identify clearly the safe circulation space. If this loss is not compensated for by equivalent, standardised, detectable and maintained measures, the result is not a kinder city, but a more ambiguous space, more difficult to interpret, more unsafe and therefore more excluding. For this reason, any urban transformation must ask, among other matters, this basic question: what references will a blind or low-vision person use to know where he or she is, where he or she must walk, where the risk begins and how he or she can orient himself or herself without depending on third parties?

Guide dogs are facilitating companions and an essential support for many blind people, since they can execute numerous commands, avoid obstacles, locate pedestrian crossings, stairs, doors and other points of reference, and facilitate safe and fluid journeys.

It must be understood, however, that a guide dog is trained to walk along pavements in a straight line until reaching the next pedestrian crossing. It is the user who, at all times, must know where he or she is and give the dog instructions, in a similar way to a navigation application. At present, the dog is not trained to identify whether, on a single-level street, it is moving through an exclusively pedestrian area or through a space shared with vehicles.

The lack of clear references makes it much more difficult to build a mental map in these environments than in streets with conventional pavements.

However, the guide dog does not replace urban accessibility measures and cannot compensate for a deficient design of public space. It does not interpret the city, it does not read signage, it does not determine which itinerary is safe and it does not resolve the lack of clear urban references. For this reason, the guide dog user needs an orderly, predictable and accessible environment.

This issue is especially relevant in relation to podotactile pavements. The user receives a good part of tactile information through the feet, so that warning, danger or guidance signals must be detectable, unequivocal and coherent. These elements are especially indispensable in single-level streets, where many of the conventional orientation references disappear.

In these spaces or in other mixed-use roads, the dog cannot identify whether it is circulating through an exclusively pedestrian area or through a space shared with vehicles, bicycles, motorcycles or personal mobility vehicles. For this reason, users need continuous itineraries,

pavements free of obstacles, well-defined pedestrian crossings, audible traffic lights, correctly installed tactile pavements, orderly urban furniture and clearly differentiated circulation spaces. When the environment is ambiguous or the clear separation disappears between the safe space for pedestrians and the space intended for circulation, the difficulty of orientation, uncertainty and risk increase, making mobility with a guide dog more complex and less safe.

In short, accessibility must be guaranteed for all people, whether they use a cane, a guide dog, residual vision, navigation applications or any other orientation strategy. The guide dog is a very important individual support, but the responsibility for making the city safe, legible and autonomously usable belongs to urban design, to regulations, to maintenance and to the management of public space. The mobility of blind people requires continuity, order, predictability and common codes. An accessible city is not only a city without obvious physical barriers, but a legible city: a city that offers sufficient, clear and coherent information so that people with visual disabilities can also understand the space, make decisions and move with autonomy, safety and dignity.

A more rights-guaranteeing regulatory framework and growing social awareness

The long and often too invisible struggle of the movement of people with disabilities has, with much effort, succeeded in gradually specifying the defence of our rights in legislative rules, in making our demands visible and in denouncing the various discriminations through which ableism manifests itself.

Thus, the struggle of the movement of people with disabilities has been embodied, over recent decades, in an increasingly demanding regulatory framework.

At international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, adopted in 2006 and ratified by the Spanish State in 2008, constitutes an essential and binding interpretative parameter for all the legislation of the States that have ratified it, especially in rules on accessibility and disability. It has helped us to free ourselves from the medical and merely welfare-based and passive paradigm from which disability was perceived, in order to place the focus on a model in which persons with disabilities are active legal subjects, with the right to actively participate in our own lives. The Convention requires action on everything that makes it possible to guarantee basic rights to persons with disabilities —in areas such as mobility, education, work, access to information and culture, etc.— and has made it possible for concepts such as “autonomy”, “accessibility” and

“universal design”, among others, to become essential and unavoidable in all urban planning projects and in the necessary debate on the model of city we want.

A clear example of the Spanish State’s adoption of this new model of the Convention can be seen in the recent reform of article 49 of the Spanish Constitution of 1978, to guarantee and constitutionalise this new paradigm.

At State level, this process began with Law 13/1982, of 7 April, on the social integration of disabled persons, known as LISMI, and continued with Law 51/2003, of 2 December, on equal opportunities, non-discrimination and universal accessibility for persons with disabilities, which, even before the UN Convention, incorporated with greater force the concepts of universal accessibility, design for all and equal opportunities. Subsequently, Law 49/2007, of 26 December, established the regime of offences and sanctions in this matter, and this whole regulatory body was integrated and consolidated in the text of the General Law on the rights of persons with disabilities and their social inclusion, approved by Royal Legislative Decree 1/2013, of 29 November.

In specific relation to urbanized public spaces, mention must be made of Royal Decree 505/2007, of 20 April, still in force, Order VIV/561/2010, of 1 February, and its subsequent replacement by Order TMA/851/2021, of 23 July, on the basic conditions of accessibility and non-discrimination for access to and use of urbanized public spaces.

In the Catalan sphere, this evolution also has its own trajectory, which starts with Decree 100/1984, of 10 April, on the removal of architectural barriers, the first specific Catalan rule on this matter; continues with Law 20/1991, of 25 November, on the promotion of accessibility and the removal of architectural barriers, and with Decree 135/1995, of 24 March, which approved the first Accessibility Code of Catalonia; and is profoundly renewed with Law 13/2014, of 30 October, on accessibility, finally developed by Decree 209/2023, of 28 November, which approves the new Accessibility Code of Catalonia and places universal accessibility as a cross-cutting obligation that must inform the design, execution, maintenance and effective use of public spaces, services and facilities, and which has a much greater impact than previous rules on the needs of people with sensory and intellectual disabilities.

All these rules represent a very significant step forward in the guarantee of rights and in the determination of practical criteria.

Undoubtedly, therefore, the struggle of the movement of people with disabilities has succeeded in markedly improving the regulatory framework relating to accessibility issues and to our rights in general, and these regulatory achievements have increased awareness of the need to guarantee all these rights that we have as members of a society.

Now, however, we must reflect on the extent to which the legislative framework does not remain only on paper, whether it is materialised effectively and whether, in the field now concerning us, the major city projects effectively comply with the criterion of universal accessibility.

The single-level mixed-use street, an urban planning model that has become generalised

In the 1990s, the idea that cities must be sustainable environments and that pedestrians must be prioritised over the use of private vehicles gradually took firm root. The expansion of public transport networks and the promotion of bicycle use fall within this will.

However, as regards the design of streets and squares, this desire and commitment to make cities more for pedestrians and less for cars has materialised in the commitment to the single-level street model as indisputable, unquestionable and, in certain discourses, even almost magical. The suppression of the physical difference in level between pavement and carriageway is a structure that has for many decades been applied in very specific areas —*Plaça Sant Jaume, Portal de l'Àngel*, *Porta Ferrissa*, for example— where the aim is to create a space for civic encounter or for recreational or commercial strolling. The determining fact of urban planning over the last thirty years is that this model has become generalised in very diverse types of streets or squares and has been made compatible with the use —fully open or restricted— of vehicles.

For blind people —as for the majority of citizens— the possibility of enjoying streets and squares is a pleasure provided that they are exclusively pedestrian environments.

However, it is very important to bear in mind that, for blind people, when the physical difference between pavement and carriageway disappears and ceases to be detectable by the feet or by the white cane, it entails a loss of references and orientation that it is important to avoid or, if implemented, to compensate for with other guiding elements —such as tactile guidance pavements—, with a clear ordering of urban furniture, rigorous control to prevent the parking of vehicles in these environments, etc.

Nevertheless, from ACIC we want to go beyond a simplistic approach that presents the single-level street as a model that is always adequate or always inadequate, since the debate on its appropriateness does not focus exclusively on the elimination of the difference in level between pavement and carriageway —which, as we have already pointed out, always brings a risk of lack of safety to our mobility— but requires the assessment of several parameters, such as the real use of the space, the intensity and nature of the traffic permitted in it, the clarity of urban ordering and the effective guarantees of orientation and safety for blind people.

In this regard, it is appropriate to distinguish at least three different situations of use of the single-level street:

First, there are exclusively pedestrian spaces, where the single-level street may be an acceptable and even positive solution, provided that the space is well ordered, that urban furniture does not invade passage itineraries, that there are sufficient tactile references or guiding elements and that a clear and predictable reading of the environment is guaranteed.

Second, there are streets of real coexistence, with an absolutely exceptional, limited and controlled presence of vehicles. In these cases, the single-level street is only acceptable if accompanied by strict guarantees: clear delimitation of the safe pedestrian itinerary, clearly separated from the space for vehicles, effective tactile signage, rigorous organisation of loading and unloading, effective prohibition of improper parking, control of personal mobility vehicles and permanent maintenance of accessibility elements.

Third, there are streets or squares where, despite the discourse of traffic calming, there continues to be regular vehicle traffic, circulation of bicycles, motorcycles or personal mobility vehicles, municipal services, loading and unloading or frequent access to car parks. In these cases, the single-level mixed-use street poses a structural risk for blind people, because it eliminates an essential physical reference —the detectable separation between the safe pedestrian space and the circulation space— without replacing it with an equivalent guarantee of orientation, protection and safety.

In short, when this street or square with a single-level surface permits vehicle traffic, these environments become very dangerous because our lack of safety when moving increases exponentially. The replacement of a perfectly detectable difference in level by a strip of raised dots cannot, in any case, be understood as an equivalent change of reference, since the way in which they are detected and the precision of their detection are very different —

and even more so if the relief of these warning dots is, as often happens, very slight and not immediately perceptible. The distressing feeling that the mixed-use single-level street generates for us because we are not sure that we are walking in the safe area—since often there is no truly safe area in the whole street— is an unpleasant sensation which, unfortunately, has increased in recent years thanks to the implementation of the mixed-use single-level street as a supposedly universal-design model that excludes blind people —and many other citizen groups— because it makes our autonomous mobility through the city more difficult and undoubtedly much more dangerous.

To this complex reality must be added —and this is not a minor element— the fact that in recent decades there has been a very great increase in the use of vehicles that cannot be identified acoustically, such as bicycles, scooters and electric cars and vehicles, both public-service and private.

For this reason, from ACIC we invite you to reflect on the indiscriminate and discriminatory use of this model. From ACIC we do not question every single-level street in the abstract, nor obviously do we oppose traffic calming or the recovery of public space for pedestrians. What we reject is the uncritical generalisation of a mixed-use single-level street model which, when applied abusively in environments with real traffic or with disordered uses of public space, reduces the autonomy of blind people and seriously increases their lack of safety in everyday journeys.

During the first years of this century, the superblock model began to be applied in various points of the city and with various functions. Many streets in the Gràcia neighbourhood, for example, removed a physical differentiation between pavement and carriageway in order to facilitate pedestrian mobility, since the old pavements were too narrow to allow more accessible and comfortable mobility. The necessary removal of an obvious physical barrier, however, generated some problems typical of the mixed-use single-level street: the lack of references to know that we are walking in a safe area, the location of urban furniture and waste-collection containers, the parking of vehicles at any point in the street, etc. This model was also implemented in the construction of continuous pavements that suppress level differences when crossing perpendicular streets, and the passion for this model led to its implementation in such unfortunate reforms as the suppression of the pavement on the mountain side of a section of Carrer Pere IV —a street with considerable traffic— and, in 2015, with the service lane open to all vehicles on the new pavements of Passeig de Gràcia —a lane open to traffic with clearly insufficient tactile signage, which becomes a very serious

source of unsafeness and danger. This commitment to the model entered a stage of full consolidation with the superblocks —from the first pilot one in *Poblenou* in 2016, *the Sant Antoni* one in 2019 and the *Consell de Cent* one in 2023.

Faced with the passionate defence of the model by political and technical officials and especially as a result of the nonsense of the new *Passeig de Gràcia* —at that time applauded without disagreement by most political and technical officials, questioned a few years later by most technical officials, but which today, a decade after its implementation, continues to be one of the darkest spots for accessibility for blind people in this city— various organisations in the field of visual and physical disability and pedestrian organisations formed the *Carrers per a Tothom* (Streets for everyone) Platform, a meeting space for groups with diverse needs with the aim of sharing our experiences and drawing up proposals that were cross-cutting and that would provide clear guidance towards the effective guarantee of universal accessibility. The work of this Platform was very interesting because, for the first time in the history of the associative movement in the disability sector in Catalonia, we shared visions, needs and experiences which were embodied in analysis and proposal documents that were very useful as tools for awareness-raising and, as regards the more technical and legal dimension, for helping to determine the regulatory framework that the Accessibility Code, as the fundamental regulatory rule since its entry into force in 2023, establishes on the question of mixed-use single-level streets.

In this regard, the current Accessibility Code of Catalonia does not treat single-level streets as a free or generalisable urban planning solution, but as an exceptional option, subject to strict conditions of accessibility, safety and technical justification. At the outset, urban planning, urbanization projects and ordinary works projects must guarantee physical, sensory and cognitive universal accessibility, and cannot be approved if they present shortcomings arising from non-compliance with Law 13/2014 or with the Accessibility Code itself.

In newly created urban road spaces, the general rule is that there must be pavements and carriageway and accessible pedestrian itineraries on each side, and single-level solutions are only admissible on pedestrian-use roads, that is, roads mainly intended for the circulation of persons in which only service vehicles are allowed to circulate at limited times. In addition, these roads must have sufficient width so that accessible itineraries do not overlap with the central space enabled for the occasional passage of vehicles.

In existing urban road spaces, mixed-use single-level streets are an exceptional and conditioned solution and cannot be understood as a generalisable model. They must have, as a minimum, a practicable pedestrian itinerary on each side, and are only admissible in pedestrian streets; in roads that do not contain parking and have a total width of less than 8.00 m; or in roads with parking on one side and a total width of less than 10.00 m; and they are exceptionally permitted when it is justified that their layout, irregular perimeter and width do not allow a conventional solution of pavements and carriageway at different levels with adequate conditions to be adopted.

As regards accessible itineraries, mixed-use single-level streets with a width equal to or greater than 6.00 m, without parking, must have an accessible itinerary on one of the sides, and mixed-use single-level streets with a width equal to or greater than 8.00 m, with parking on one side, must have an accessible itinerary on one of the sides.

In both situations, the other side may have an accessible or practicable itinerary according to the characteristics and possibilities of the road.

Therefore, the current regulations do not authorise an indiscriminate implementation of mixed-use single-level streets, but subject them to a restrictive, justified logic conditioned on the existence of accessible or practicable pedestrian itineraries, not overlapping with vehicular circulation, perceptible for blind people and equipped with sufficient tactile, chromatic, physical and functional measures to preserve orientation, autonomy and safety.

According to this regulation, then, one of the great challenges of the coming years is not only to deploy an Accessibility Code that is more complete and demanding than the previous one, but to guarantee its effective compliance in the face of the mismatches and excesses accumulated in recent years through the indiscriminate implementation of mixed-use single-level streets and superblocks. The new Accessibility Code of Catalonia requires the auditing of single-level streets already executed, checking whether they have real, differentiated, perceptible and well-maintained accessible or practicable itineraries, and adopting corrective, reordering or reversal measures when the autonomy, safety and equality of use of public space by blind or low-vision people are not guaranteed.

In short, if we analyse the reality of recent years in our cities, regulatory evolution and the reality in our streets reveal a paradox that must be addressed rigorously: while the legal framework has progressively advanced towards a more demanding conception of universal accessibility, equal opportunities, design for all and personal autonomy, a very significant

part of the urban planning practised in recent years in our municipalities has advanced in a direction materially contrary to these principles. The generalisation of the mixed-use single-level street and the expansion of certain models of superblock or traffic-calmed street have often been presented as modern, sustainable and pedestrian-friendly actions, but have not incorporated in a real and effective way the needs of blind or low-vision people or of people with other disabilities. In many cases, the suppression of the difference in level between pavement and carriageway, the disappearance of clear physical references, coexistence with vehicles, bicycles, motorcycles, personal mobility vehicles, municipal services, loading and unloading or access to car parks, and the insufficiency of tactile signage or of functional delimitation of space have caused an objective loss of autonomy, orientation and safety. Thus, under the language of pacification and the recovery of public space, designs have sometimes been consolidated that have transferred to blind people an undue burden of permanent vigilance and assumption of risk.

Accessibility in the design of projects

Another of the great challenges that we have on the table today is to include universal design within aesthetic canons, overcoming the false opposition between beauty and accessibility, between attractive design and universal functionality. Too often, public spaces, facilities and urban elements are conceived from strictly aesthetic criteria that ignore or even contravene the needs of many people with disabilities. The lack of chromatic contrast, the use of pavements that are difficult to detect, inadequate lighting or the absence of clear and understandable signage are design decisions that limit personal autonomy and endanger the safety of many people. And this should never happen. A good urban planning or architectural project is not one that sacrifices accessibility in the name of a certain idea of modernity or beauty, but one that is capable of harmoniously integrating both dimensions. We need streets, squares and facilities that are understandable and usable for everyone; spaces where an older person, a child, a person with a visual, hearing or cognitive disability can orient himself or herself, understand the signage, move with autonomy and safety and find what he or she is looking for. The incorporation of braille, pictograms, easy reading or other elements of cognitive and sensory accessibility cannot continue to be understood as an uncomfortable or unaesthetic addition, but as a natural and integrated part of design. Architects, urban planners, and designers must incorporate accessibility from the very first moment of the creative process of the project and not as a subsequent correction imposed by regulations, which often ends up generating improvised, poorly functional solutions visually disconnected from the whole. In short, the paradigm must change: a project that

fully incorporates universal accessibility criteria can be equally innovative, attractive and beautiful; this should be the challenge. And we are convinced that it is precisely this capacity to include everyone that makes it socially valuable and truly contemporary.

Walking along the pavements

If we speak of the ease and safety of moving autonomously through streets with conventional pavements, where pedestrian space and vehicle space are clearly segregated, we must assess several aspects.

- In general terms, it must be noted that over these three decades the signage of major works has improved considerably because construction areas are much more commonly protected with continuous fences, well-defined alternative passages are established, etc.
- As regards scaffolding, improvement is uneven because, although it is true that there is currently quite a lot of better-installed scaffolding —which leaves a protected free passage, does not invade passage itineraries and covers poles with protective materials— we still find many that do not comply with the regulations because the poles are not protected, poles or elements are located at a height not detectable with the cane, and essential itineraries such as pedestrian crossings are occupied.
- As regards specific works —often repairs to basic supply pipelines— the reality is very complex and far from guaranteeing safety and compliance with the regulations. Beyond expressing a doubt about the orderly and therefore less invasive planning of the execution of this type of work, it must be stressed that we still often find uncovered holes or holes with unstable protection, fences placed around the perimeter of the intervention but easily moved, signage with plastic tape at a height that is not detectable, etc.
- At junctions there has been a very significant increase in traffic lights with acoustic signals and many tactile guidance strips have been installed to mark crossing points or bus stops.
- In relation to obstacles, it must be said that pavements remain quite full of mobile elements that protrude from the facade line and do not comply with the regulations. Signs for bars and restaurants, flowerpots or other decorative natural elements, various advertising objects and small counters of catering establishments, etc., occupy pedestrian passage space and are often the cause of blows and injuries. At various times, awareness-raising campaigns have been carried out on the need to

avoid these elements, which are an obvious obstacle and a danger for blind people —as early as the late 1990s we participated in the design and dissemination of an intense campaign promoted by the *Institut municipal de persones amb discapacitat*, IMPD (Municipal Institute of Persons with Disabilities). In this regard, and for some years now, this has been an important issue in the CASBA project, which works to make shops accessible to everyone. The fact is that we have found that these campaigns and other actions carried out by the City Council produce temporary improvements but that, after a time, the occupation of pavements occurs again.

- Another important problem is the location of selective waste-collection containers in various parts of the city, since they are located right at the edge of a bicycle lane and, therefore, it is very dangerous necessarily to have to cross that lane in order to deposit waste in the corresponding container. On the other hand, door-to-door collection proposals —whether for residents in general or for shops— entail a forceful and disordered occupation of the accessible passage space on pavements.
- A particularly paradigmatic case of indiscriminate occupation of public space is that of bar and restaurant terraces. Terraces are not, in themselves, incompatible with accessibility, but when they are authorised or tolerated without rigorous ordering they can seriously compromise the mobility of people with visual disabilities: they interrupt passage itineraries, invade the facade line or force people to abandon it, generate mobile obstacles that are difficult to foresee, displace pedestrians towards less safe areas and introduce elements such as tables, chairs, parasols, planters, screens or lecterns that are often not detectable sufficiently in advance with the cane. This problem has worsened in recent years due to the tendency to consider public space as an available surface for private use, without sufficiently assessing that, for blind people, the continuity, predictability and cleanliness of itineraries are basic conditions of autonomy and safety

  In Barcelona, the 2013 municipal regulation of terraces was born with the will to order the installation of these elements in public space, but subsequent reforms have gradually introduced criteria of greater flexibility.

  Thus, the 2018 reform had a clearly deregulatory effect with respect to the initial model of the 2013 Terrace Ordinance, because it transformed certain guarantees of ordering and accessibility, originally conceived as strict limits on the private occupation of public space, into indicative criteria, more flexible, modulable and, in practice, dispensable in many cases.

Subsequently, as a result of the pandemic, the reform finally approved in December 2021, corrected in 2022, consolidated part of the exceptional extensions and permits enabled to favour catering activity in a context of crisis. This evolution explains why today the problem is not only the occasional non-compliance of some terraces, but a tendency to normalise a more intense, dispersed and flexible occupation of public space.

From the perspective of universal accessibility, this evolution requires a critical review. The authorisation of a terrace should not be limited to checking on the plan that a minimum free width remains, but should verify whether the resulting itinerary is truly accessible, continuous, logical, detectable, safe and maintained in daily practice. When terraces intensively occupy pavements, squares, chamfered corners or traffic-calmed spaces, especially in single-level environments or areas of great tourist and commercial pressure, they can turn the autonomous movement of blind people into an uncertain route full of obstacles.

For this reason, a more rights-guaranteeing ordering must be recovered, inspection reinforced, the immediate removal of improperly placed elements required, and municipal regulations adapted to the 2023 Accessibility Code of Catalonia, so that economic activity is not developed at the expense of the right of all persons, and especially persons with disabilities, to use public space with autonomy, safety and equality.

This issue has been the subject of intense advocacy by ACIC and other social and neighbourhood organisations, especially the Federation of Neighbourhood Associations of Barcelona, which have called for a thorough reform of the Terrace Ordinance in order to adapt it fully to the Accessibility Code of Catalonia and to recover a more rights-guaranteeing ordering of public space. This demand does not respond only to a sectoral concern of blind people, but also to a broader urban problem: the massive and often disordered installation of terraces has compromised accessible itineraries, has in fact privatised spaces essential for everyday mobility and, at the same time, has significantly aggravated conflicts of coexistence and the failure of the neighbourhood’s right to rest, especially in areas strained by leisure, tourism and the concentration of catering activity. For this reason, the reform of the Ordinance cannot be limited to adjusting metres or authorisation criteria, but must assume an integral view that simultaneously guarantees universal accessibility, the

common use of public space, neighbourhood coexistence and the effective protection of citizens' rest.

Accessibility to transport

It is a relevant and indisputable fact that, from the 1990s to the present, the public transport network has experienced notable growth: new metro lines and the extension of existing lines, the tramway, the reorganisation of the bus network, the increase in the frequency of trains connecting the city of Barcelona with neighbouring counties —despite the structural and endemic deficit of *Rodalies*—, major advances in fare integration, etc. In general terms, it is true that the commitment to accessibility has become part of priorities, as we have recently been able to observe with the implementation of the *T-mobilitat*, which from the beginning was conceived with accessibility measures that allow the app and the machines used to obtain and recharge it to be used easily.

Certainly, however, much work remains to be done before it can be said that the whole of public transport is fully accessible.

If we focus on those most relevant aspects that guarantee accessibility for blind people, we must refer to several elements:

- A very important issue because of the danger it entails is end-of-platform signage which, although in *RENFE* stations it is already fairly well resolved, is still not resolved in most stations of the Barcelona Metro and of *Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat*, even though FGC already has a project in which ACIC has collaborated as users to implement this signage, but which today is still pending execution.
- Public-address announcements have been implemented quite correctly in the metro, bus and tram, especially internal announcements. As regards the external announcement that makes it possible to know which bus or tram is arriving, effectiveness is very often conditioned by the noise of the road where the stops are located, so some improvement would be needed. It must be stressed that there are still quite a few deficiencies in the functioning of the announcements emitted by bus and tram stops and, above all, we cannot forget that most interurban buses that arrive in or depart from Barcelona still do not have public-address services informing inside or outside the vehicle so

that we can follow the route, identify the stop that interests us or know which bus is arriving at the stop where we are waiting.

- Another question which, despite being provided for in the Accessibility Code, is still not at all present in our city is braille signage on the handrails of *Metro*, FGC and RENFE stations. We know that various trials have been carried out, but we have no evidence that there is currently any project to implement this measure, which would be so useful for us in accessing information in stations.

Spaces for the practice of physical exercise

An important activity for all people is doing sport. It is important to do sport as a hobby, because it makes one feel better, but also for health reasons (de-stressing, compensating for sedentary work, etc.) and it often forms part of the prescriptions of family doctors. On occasions, for example, walking one hour a day forms part of the treatment to lose weight or normalise cholesterol levels.

For a person with a visual disability, following these indications, so simple for the majority of the population, is not at all easy, since, in general, there is not a sufficiently long and sufficiently safe route along which he or she can move autonomously and safely at a regular pace. For this reason, it would be very important to implement accessibility measures on routes that the general population already uses for these purposes.

This very necessary practice of sport can also be carried out in facilities intended for this purpose, and we note that at present they are environments in which what the Accessibility Code determines is scarcely complied with so that a blind person can access the different areas of the facilities autonomously (changing rooms, swimming pool, gym room, etc.).

Obviously, however, and as happens in other fields and services, the guarantee of accessibility to facilities, spaces or equipment cannot be considered sufficient, but human supports must be available that allow, for example, in a gym room, locating the machine being sought, knowing whether it is free and being able to use it when screens that are exclusively visual must be activated. In swimming pools, the collaboration of the lifeguard may be required to locate a free lane or to avoid falling into the pool when moving around the premises. And if the person wants to do yoga, Pilates or aquagym, the instructor must give explanations and position himself or herself so that the person with a visual disability can see them if he or she has low vision or can follow the class without seeing the instructor,

since totally blind people cannot follow movements by imitation and the instructor must describe the positions or demonstrate them on the body.

Parks, gardens, natural spaces

Cities also define an environment with quality of life through the parks and gardens that offer the possibility of breathing, walking, doing physical exercise and other healthy practices, as well as enjoying a more natural environment. These natural spaces within the city or within its municipal area are, except for some very particular case, today in Barcelona inaccessible spaces for blind people, since they do not have accessible itineraries that allow us to move through them autonomously. Beyond a very relevant and successful initiative that was implemented in the *Collserola* Natural Park about twenty years ago —the accessible path from the *Baixador de Vallvidrera* FGC station to *Vila Joana* and the Park Interpretation Centre, which has a guide plinth, today very deteriorated in several sections due to lack of maintenance, and information panels in print and braille, unfortunately vandalised— no other accessibility project for blind people has materialised in the city's parks. This almost absolute lack of tactile guidance paths or guide plinths means that today, unfortunately, the possibility that blind people have of enjoying the parks and natural spaces within the municipality is very small. We must stress the interesting initiative promoted by the IMPD of sheets with directions for reaching parks, gardens and other facilities or spaces of the city from public transport and for moving around these spaces. But beyond this resource, our enjoyment of these spaces that we have so close by is reduced to moments when we enjoy them accompanied or because it is a very well-known place where we have deployed certain orientation and mobility strategies.

Play areas and beaches

In recent years, some positive experiences have been carried out in Barcelona showing that accessibility must also reach spaces for leisure, play and enjoyment of public space, and must not be limited only to strictly functional journeys.

In the field of children's play, since 2018 Barcelona City Council has promoted measures to favour inclusion in these spaces. A good example is the proposal at the *Clariana de Glòries*, which has become consolidated as a reference space in inclusive play because, beyond the physical accessibility conditions of the environment, this space has incorporated inclusive table games conceived so that they can be used jointly by people with and without disabilities, resources that incorporate textures, reliefs, chromatic contrasts and accessible games in braille and relief, allowing a shared and enriching experience for all

citizens. We consider this initiative especially interesting because it shows that inclusion does not depend solely on the removal of physical barriers, but also on the incorporation of resources that guarantee the effective participation of all people in play and coexistence activities.

The pilot play-support project promoted by Barcelona City Council in 2022 within the framework of the Plan for Play in Public Space must also be highlighted. This initiative offered the accompaniment of specialised professionals to children with disabilities and also to responsible adults with disabilities who required support in order to enjoy play areas with their sons and daughters. The project showed that, beyond the physical accessibility of spaces, in certain situations it is necessary to have personal supports that facilitate effective participation in everyday and leisure activities. It is an especially relevant experience because it shows that universal accessibility also implies guaranteeing the necessary supports so that all people can exercise their rights on equal terms. Precisely because of the positive impact observed, it would be highly desirable for this experience to cease to be a pilot and to become consolidated as a stable city service, accessible to the families that need it. Experiences such as this constitute good practice in favour of the independent living of people with visual disabilities. In the case of mothers and fathers with blindness or low vision, the possibility of having occasional personal supports can be decisive in guaranteeing the supervision and accompaniment of children in open and dynamic spaces such as play areas. These types of measures make it possible to exercise parenthood on equal terms and make effective the right of all families to enjoy public space.

Thus, it is clear that the right to play also forms part of the right to the city. An accessible children’s area is not only one that allows physical entry, but one that makes it possible to arrive by a safe itinerary, to orient oneself, to identify the different spaces, to use non-segregating play elements and to share the activity with other children. For blind people, this requires that access to the area be clear and free of obstacles, that the internal organisation be understandable, that there be tactile, sound or chromatic references when useful, that the play elements do not generate unforeseeable risks and that families can easily locate entrances, benches, stay areas, exits and points of reference. Likewise, it would be very advisable to incorporate small accessible information panels, with information in braille and relief, which would allow the different play elements present in each area to be identified, as well as the sports equipment located in outdoor sports practice spaces. Having accessible information on the uses and characteristics of the available elements is a

necessary condition for people with visual disabilities to be able to participate on equal terms and with full autonomy in play, leisure and sport activities. Therefore, the challenge is not only to install some adapted game, but to conceive the whole space as an inclusive, legible and safe environment.

Relevant resources have also been promoted in the field of beaches, especially bathing support points for people with disabilities or reduced mobility. In Barcelona, the bathing support service has operated on beaches such as *Nova Icària*, *Sant Miquel* and the *Fòrum* bathing area, with support staff, amphibious chairs, hoists or other materials that facilitate entry into and exit from the water, depending on the season and the annual organisation of the service. In 2025, for example, the start of the service at *Nova Icària* from April to October was announced. This service is very valuable because it allows people who, without this support, would be excluded from bathing activity to access an ordinary, shared leisure experience fully integrated into the life of the city.

However, from the perspective of blind people, it must be insisted that accessibility to the beach cannot be limited to the moment of entering the water: it must also include arrival from public transport, locating the support point, orientation to the sand, identification of services, showers, toilets, shaded areas and exits, and the availability of accessible information before and during use of the service. In this regard, the incorporation of sound beacons at various bathing support points on Barcelona's beaches must be valued positively. This action constitutes good accessibility practice because it facilitates the autonomous location of services by blind people in an environment that is especially complex from the point of view of orientation, such as the beach. The possibility of independently locating bathing support points contributes directly to personal autonomy, safety and the effective exercise of the right to leisure on equal terms.

In short, the experiences of inclusive play and bathing support show that it is perfectly possible to move towards more accessible leisure in public space. But they also show that these resources still need to be consolidated, extended territorially, maintained, reported in an accessible way and to incorporate more systematically the specific needs of blind people. A truly accessible city is not only one that allows circulation through the streets, but also one that allows people to play, rest, bathe, do sport, enjoy parks and participate in community life with autonomy, safety and equal opportunities.

Access to information and heritage

Access to information is also an essential axis if we want to build cities truly for everyone. Knowing what the city is like —its location in relation to the sea and the Collserola Natural Park as natural elements that delimit it, the districts that configure it and where they are located on the general city map, the layout of its neighbourhoods, the specific surroundings of emblematic areas, etc.— is a basic need that allows us to understand the structure of the city and move around it much more comfortably. For sighted people, the possibility of accessing maps is very simple, easy and direct. At present, for blind people this possibility is very small or simply non-existent. We know of experiences of cities that have a collection of tactile-visual maps of their urban fabric. In Barcelona, at some point *Organización nacional de ciegos españoles*, ONCE (National Organization of Spanish Blind People) edited maps of some specific areas of the city and recently TMB has edited a tactile-visual map of the metro network that can be consulted in some stations or requested at its user-service offices, which allows us to know in detail the whole layout of the network and, with this information, also to form a more precise idea of the structure of Barcelona and of the neighbouring cities connected by this public transport. It would be very important for Barcelona to have a collection of tactile-visual maps available to the people who live in it, work in it, want to know it and enjoy it.

However, beyond tactile-visual maps, it is important that it be easy and accessible to access information on where these maps could be consulted —if they exist— or to know what accessibility resources are available to us in the various areas that make up the life of the city.

But a city is not only its geographical location and its urban design; it is a living reality, a landscape full of history and culture. Blind people today have very few possibilities of fully knowing relevant buildings, monuments, public sculpture, ornamental fountains, etc., which make up the rich heritage of this city. Certainly, there are cultural facilities that have resources —tactile models and visits that allow elements to be touched— and that are very interesting —let us think, for example, of the adaptations made at the *Born Centre de Cultura*, which allows one to tour the Barcelona of 1714, *La Pedrera* or the *Sagrada Família*, among others— but we do not have models in the street or in emblematic facilities, nor a collection of reproductions of public sculptures.

Overall, therefore, today Barcelona is still not an accessible city for blind people, both as regards the possibility of knowing its urban reality and as regards its cultural heritage most directly connected with the city.

Participation model

Thirty years ago, when our organisation began its path, in the city of Barcelona there were several participation spaces promoted by the IMPD. Thus, our organisation joined various committees that dealt with different topics, especially urban planning and transport. Later, a working space on accessibility to culture was also established, and we also participated in some working groups on specific issues such as bus public-address systems, which worked in great depth on this important question of access to information.

Although these spaces were not always sufficiently operative and often became places where each person expressed his or her unease regarding the city's shortcomings without, in many cases, possible solutions being discussed, we value them as very useful for knowing what the municipal lines of action were on the various issues and they also allowed the opinions of the different groups to be expressed in relation to the projected solutions, and thus to modify and improve them.

Over time, these spaces gradually disappeared or became merely informative meetings where consolidated projects were discussed, with very little possibility of implementing changes. We therefore understood that, for Barcelona City Council, participation was reduced to being informed and that, in addition, this validated its projects merely by making users participants in them.

On the other hand, we found that the City Council increasingly preferred to foster the participation of individual citizens rather than that of organisations from the various sectors, such as ours, despite their having many years of experience, and this experience might even be uncomfortable.

Despite everything, from ACIC we continued insisting on finding ways to make our opinion heard, especially when the implementation of the single-level street began and, later, the superblock projects. It must be stressed that this was possible for a fairly long period —between 2017 and 2023— thanks to the will of the Urban Planning Management. During that period we participated in various tests of signalling pavements and in many meetings which, although they did not serve to question the abusive application of the mixed-use single-level street model, did allow some specific project to be stopped and helped greatly

to make the problems of people with visual disabilities understood, to foster interest in finding adequate solutions and to work to establish consensus in some singular projects such as *Via Laietana*.

After this period, which ended abruptly, we once again note the impossibility of making our opinions heard and of finding spaces for reflection on accessibility issues at municipal level. Thus, we note with sadness and concern the regression that we have suffered at the participatory level compared with the situation thirty years ago, since in Barcelona in the last three years there has been no possibility of continuing to participate, as a grassroots organisation, in new urban planning projects.

Conclusions and proposals

The review of the fundamental axes that have defined the urban reality of Barcelona over the last thirty years allows us to affirm that it is indisputable that the guarantee of accessibility has entered as an essential axis in the legislative framework, in the growing awareness of this need among persons with political and technical responsibility, and that some interesting experiences have been produced in the right direction of guaranteeing accessibility.

However, given the relevance of the issue and the problem it represents for blind people, as regards the urban planning of squares and streets, we must conclude that the commitment to the mixed-use single-level street model and its abusive implementation, often in breach of current legislation, has generated for blind and low-vision people a very significant loss of our autonomy and has entailed an exponential increase in ourunsafeness. In short, we can state that today it is more difficult for us to move autonomously through many streets and squares of the city and that we do so assuming a higher level of tension and risk than years ago.

This finding requires, in our opinion, the opening of a substantive debate on universal accessibility in urban space and in facilities of all kinds in the city of Barcelona and in the rest of the country's cities. We understand that one of the fundamental objectives of this debate is to rethink the single-level street model as a solution, as an urban planning model to be implemented everywhere, and to analyse carefully, following the indications determined by the regulatory framework and the experience of those of us who want to move autonomously and safely through the city, in which streets or squares it is necessary and in which other streets or squares other urban structures can be implemented that truly

guarantee universal accessibility. It is essential that political officials open a serious working framework with all voices from the sectors involved and that we jointly analyse proposals that are truly satisfactory and allow us to advance towards a city that is truly for everyone.

This necessary debate, however, if it is to be carried out rigorously and with the will to be a useful tool for building a Barcelona for everyone, must also place on the table these four strategic axes which, together with reflection on the urban planning model, will allow us to move safely towards the guarantee of universal accessibility:

1. *Joint and permanent work among the administration, technical officials, organisations in the disability sector and the neighbourhood movement.* The analysis of reality and the promotion of accessibility require the administration to work jointly with organisations, with truly participatory systems, in order to reflect on the urban planning model, agree on the design of singular projects and determine priorities in the various areas —streets, transport, parks, cultural heritage, etc. This meeting space must also be useful for exploring designs of specific signalling elements that are as comfortable and efficient as possible for all groups, avoiding the traditional desire to confront needs and committing to a practical search for concrete solutions that truly make effective the will to work for universal accessible design. Let us think, for example, of the design of hazard warning points, which must be highly noticeable so that blind people can detect them easily and must also not be an obstacle for wheelchair users or users of other mobility supports.
2. *Compliance with existing regulations and attention to maintenance*. The commitment to enforcing existing regulatory frameworks in the various areas that make up the reality of streets and squares must be deepened —for example, regarding the protection of works, the removal of elements that occupy the free passage space on pavements, information systems, signage in accessible formats, etc.— and great care must be taken with the maintenance of all services and resources implemented —audible traffic lights, guide elements, signs, etc.— since too often lack of maintenance invalidates their effectiveness.
3. *Training, visibility and awareness-raising*. It is essential to foster, in the training curricula of architecture and design studies, the criterion of accessibility as an essential and defining element of all projects. All students of these studies should be able to incorporate into their background the criterion of accessibility as a central and unavoidable axis. The visibility of projects that have successfully incorporated

accessibility from their design helps to provide positive references and to understand that the guarantee of accessibility is not only a legal requirement, but that it is perfectly possible to materialise it. The pedagogical and awareness-raising dimension is a very useful and necessary means that must be periodically nourished, whether through campaigns aimed at specific sectors or at citizens as a whole.

4. *Barcelona, capital of a country*. We understand that Barcelona must be thought of as a living city, necessarily structured with neighbouring cities and as the capital of the country, but avoiding centralist tendencies that do not help to build a city and a country truly for everyone.

From the *Associació catalana per a la integració de les persones cegues*, ACIC (Catalan Association for the Integration of Blind People), we remain fully willing to continue working in all spaces that help to overcome barriers, break discriminations and allow us to gradually weave a society more truly for everyone.