

Accessible Urban Space: A Sketch of a Moment

Joe Thompson reflects on SPARC BC's official networking event *Accessible Urban Space: A Facilitated Discussion on Inclusive Cities and Communities*, held on June 20, 2006 at the UN World Urban Forum 3 in Vancouver.

AROUND THE WORLD so many disabled folk sit in back rooms, uneducated, underutilized, viewed as drains on a family's resources. In so many places there are so many other issues: clean water, food, coping with urban expansion, job creation, slums, education, vaccination. Disability-related issues aren't even close to the top ten on the public agenda.

But here in British Columbia we can afford to explore this topic, and for those of us who are no longer in back rooms, it scores a considerably higher priority. And so I decided to attend the World Urban Forum 3 (WUF3) to bring my comprehension of the concerns of disabled folk and of other real problems to the world.

I tripped into SPARC BC's Accessible Urban Space session largely by chance. So much was going on at WUF3 that it was a virtual maelstrom of opportunity. Given the conference

schedule, a person could only attend less than 5% of all the events—and for somebody with limited stamina, even less. The first recommendation to attend SPARC BC's event came from a chance meeting on the WUF3 trade show floor with a SPARC BC staff member. Later, I saw a fellow disability activist, Craig, wheeling down the main hallway of the Vancouver Convention and Exhibition Centre—"Be there!" he said.

So on day two of WUF3, just after lunch, I found myself upstairs in a ballroom among many chairs thoughtfully arranged with a triple-wide aisle and tape-marked wheelchair parking slots on the floor. A table of techies was busy at the front

left, peering at computers, setting up Internet lines and coordinating communications from elsewhere. At the rear left, a WUF3 booth was set to provide French translation. By the time things got going the room was packed.

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There was lots of variety at the session. The lead moderator, Vince Verlaan, Nancy Henderson, executive director of SPARC BC, and Wendy Sarkissian, a well known Australian social planner and researcher, sketched out examples of issues of concern to urban disabled folk around the world, from curb ramps to jobs.

The main part of the session was a dialogue divided into three discussion blocks on transportation, housing, and participation. A speaker introduced each block with a short presentation of their lived experience (two of the three speakers were participating remotely over the Internet). The moderator then invited feedback from people in the room, and other people from around the world over the Internet. Many of the 70 people in the room and twenty people participating over the Internet got to contribute thoughts and suggestions.

There wasn't much in the way of other languages, varieties of English, but some accents were more inscrutable than others. Who'd think Mumbai and Newfoundland would be a bit difficult to swallow, while Singapore and Hungary

went down more smoothly. Oh, and the live captioning on the bottom of the front screen helped more than just the deaf.

Overall I was very impressed. Both the moderator and the techies said there had been a dress rehearsal to smooth topic flow and technical difficulties. Practice matters. Physio drills, dexterity exercises, been there, yes, we know. It was amazing how smoothly things went for such a complex undertaking.

My concluding thought is that this session was a marvelous experience and a fascinating assortment of tools, but while necessary, it is not sufficient. A moment is not a life, a picture is not a movie, or to paraphrase Oliver Twist, 'Could I have *more*, please?' ■

Joe also sketched an approach to continuing the dialogue which SPARC BC will actively consider as we continue our work in accessibility. Also we are developing a full report of the session that will be available on the SPARC BC website shortly.