

Learning from Libraries

Understanding inclusivity within libraries

AR2A011 - Architectural History Thesis
MSc Architecture, Technical University Delft

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April 18, 2024

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Abstract

Inclusivity and equality for individuals with disabilities have been significant throughout history and have had a profound impact over the last 50 years. This thesis examines the development of legislation for this group, the impact of an inaccessible environment on them, and how the library sector has played a pioneering role in promoting inclusivity even before the legal requirements were in place. Using the Public Library of Rotterdam as a case study, it illustrates how a library constructed in 1983 was already working toward an inclusive environment. The examination of the library covers physical accessibility, access to its collection, and its societal role. The thesis concludes that libraries have played a vital role in advocating for inclusivity for everyone. Through their commitment, libraries have created a welcoming environment for individuals with disabilities, unlike many other aspects of their lives, where exclusion remains a problem. This thesis offers a fresh perspective and calls for a more wholehearted embrace of inclusivity in our built surroundings.

Keywords

libraries, inclusivity, disability, accessibility, public library of rotterdam

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Introduction

Inclusivity and equality of individuals with disabilities have been important topics throughout history and have greatly impacted the last 50 years. The lack of, but at the same time growing attention for this minority and topics is something I'm very interested in. The library sector has been a pioneer in trying to be inclusive, even before any rules were in place (Jaeger et al., 2015). This statement is further strengthened in the book 'Library Services to the Disadvantaged and Handicapped' by Winnick & Lyman already written in 1967. In the book, the authors illustrate the actions taken by libraries in the 1960s in the United States to make library material as accessible as possible for everyone and with extra attention to people with disabilities. That's why I believe there is a lot to be learned from libraries in providing inclusivity. Therefore, the main focus of the research will be on the evolving concept of inclusivity and relate this to how libraries have been integrating it. To get insight into the implementation of inclusivity and accessibility for individuals with a disability in libraries this thesis will analyze The Public Library of Rotterdam.

This thesis will provide the reader insight into the concept of inclusivity and accessibility and how to implement it in a design. It will show that it should not feel like an obligation to provide inclusivity since libraries have done it well before any rules were established. The question that will be answered in the thesis is: *"How has the concept of inclusivity of the last 50 years influenced libraries, and how have libraries integrated the concept of inclusivity to make their buildings accessible for everyone?"*.

The sub-questions that support the answering to the research question are:

1. What is the timeline of the laws regarding the inclusivity of individuals with disabilities?
2. What is the importance of inclusivity for individuals with disabilities?
3. How have libraries provided inclusivity? And was there an impact of the pioneering role worldwide on libraries in The Netherlands?
4. How has the Public Library of Rotterdam dealt with inclusivity and accessibility, in the context of physically being able to enter the building, having access to the library's collection, and their societal role?

Literature review

For the past 70 years, the United Nations (UN) has tried to draw attention to the inclusivity of individuals with a disability by trying to change attitudes towards individuals with disabilities, achieving new heights in the movement for disability rights, and ensuring that individuals with disabilities become agents of change worldwide (Division for Social Policy and Development, 2018). In their work, the UN could take a stand with libraries. According to Jaeger et al. (2015), many libraries have already been serving individuals with disabilities for more than a hundred years. It can be said that libraries are pioneers in providing disability inclusivity. Additionally, looking into the libraries in The Netherlands the book 'Amsterdammers en hun bibliotheek' by Lakmaker & Veldkamp (2019) and the thesis 'Het systeem van openbare bibliotheken in Nederland op een concreet voorbeeld' by Riedlová (2015) unfold the measures taken by libraries in The Netherlands to be more inclusive and accessible for everyone.

Furthermore, it's important to get insight into the lives of individuals living with a disability and what it means if spaces are inaccessible to them. The article by Jaeger (2018) explains the perception of individuals with a disability in the context of the US. Adding to this statement is the book: 'Accessibility Denied. Understanding Inaccessibility and Everyday Resistance to Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities' by Egard et al. (2022). Here, the authors look at the accessibility of the disabled in different areas: city and transport, knowledge and education, and institution, law, and history. They worked closely together with the disability community to get first-hand experiences.

Lastly, the work of van Gennep et al. (2014) elaborates on the first advocacy group in The Netherlands for individuals with disabilities, founded in 1985, by illustrating the impact of this advocacy on the community of individuals with a disability. These sources show what the lack of accessibility and on the other hand presence of accessibility and inclusivity mean for the disabled.

However, this doesn't mean that it's easy to achieve inclusivity, accessibility, and usability in libraries. The complexity is illustrated by Bostick & Petrie (2009) in their analysis of 21st-century academic libraries. They refer to the development of guidelines in 2005 by the International Federation of Library Associations called: 'Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities Checklist for all types of libraries' (Irvall & Skat Nielsen, 2005), which helps libraries achieve good physical accessibility and access to its collection and services.

Methodology

The focus of the thesis centers on the historical evolution of libraries, drawing upon literature analysis and a case study. The literature initially explores the global perspective on the history and evolving legal frameworks and concepts of inclusivity and accessibility. It then focuses on the catalyzing role of the United States in this regard, before examining the specific situation in the Netherlands. The importance of inclusivity for individuals with a disability is underlined by literature that engages with these individuals and illustrates the challenges they face. The implementation of inclusivity within libraries will be analyzed through a case study focusing on the Public Library of Rotterdam. For original material about the library, the Archives of The New Institute in Rotterdam is visited.

Structure

This thesis will progress from a broad perspective, aiming to understand the contextual framework towards the specific role fulfilled by libraries, in a detailed analysis of the case study.

The first chapter will address the first and secondary sub-questions, contextualizing laws enforced concerning disabilities and illustrating how the concept of inclusivity influences the lives of these individuals. In the second chapter, the focus will shift to the role of libraries and their approach to inclusivity, directly addressing the third sub-question. Moving forward, the third chapter will tackle the final sub-question, delving into the accessibility of the Public Library of Rotterdam. The examination of the library covers physical accessibility, access to its collection, and its societal role. Lastly, the conclusion will summarize the findings, provide the answer to the main research question, and offer insights into the future of inclusivity within libraries and the urban environment.

Chapter 1 – Inclusivity

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) (2023), an estimated 1.3 billion people – or 16% of the global population – experience a significant disability. A disability can be defined as: ‘A permanent injury, illness, or physical or mental condition that tends to restrict the way that someone can live their life.’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2024a). This number is increasing because mental health and less visible diseases are being recognized as disability. On top of that people get older, which causes health problems as well. This results in a diverse group of individuals with a disability. The growth of this group makes it important to have an environment where they can thrive at the same level as the non-disabled. Often, the inequality ingrained in our surroundings may not be directly apparent to all. However, when one carefully looks at this matter, it becomes evident that our surroundings don't treat everyone alike. This makes the term inclusivity of great importance. Inclusivity can be defined as: ‘The fact or policy of not excluding members or participants on the grounds of gender, race, class, sexuality, disability, etc.’ (Collins English Dictionary, 2024b).

Nevertheless, the fight to ensure an inclusive environment has been part of society for decades. Societal fears, intolerance, and ignorance have often marked the history of treatment and attitudes toward individuals with disabilities. Throughout the ages, individuals with disabilities have been mistreated in many ways (Marini et al., 2011). The United States had a great impact on the development of laws to provide rights for individuals with a disability. The first legislation that dealt with equal rights for these individuals was the Rehabilitation Act in 1973. The act prohibited discrimination against anyone with a disability by an activity or program that receives federal funding (Bigby, 2023). However, many aspects of daily life remained unaffected, leaving individuals with disabilities still facing significant challenges (Marini et al., 2011). The government and institutions affected by the law were against the full adoption of the part of the law known as Section 504 and tried to change some aspects of the law before it was enforced. This prompted widespread protests by the community of individuals with disabilities. The documentary ‘Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution’ directed by Lebrecht & Newnham (2020) illustrates, through archival footage and interviews, the resilience and collective power behind the necessity of social change. It portrays the formation of a community of individuals who became activists, resulting in a tireless campaign for disability rights, the organization of protests, and ultimately influencing the passage of Section 504 without any changes in 1977.

Fortunately, this act marked the beginning of the admission of the rights of individuals with a disability. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted. The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities across various aspects of public life, including employment, education, transportation, and access to public and private places that are open to the general public. Unlike the Rehabilitation Act, the ADA doesn't rely on the presence of federal funding; all parties must adhere to its mandates. The ADA's objective is to ensure that individuals with disabilities enjoy equal rights and opportunities as the non-disabled. It provides civil rights similar to those based on race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion (ADA National Network, 2024).

Compared with The Netherlands, their first disability-specific laws were introduced in 2003. This legislation is “Wet Gelijke Behandeling op grond van Handicap of Chronische Ziekte (WGBH/CZ)” (Act on Equal Treatment on the grounds of Disability or Chronical Illness). This legislation encompassed labor and professional education, with plans to extend its reach to public transportation. It marked a significant stride in enhancing the legal status of individuals with disabilities or chronic illnesses and fostering their opportunities for complete engagement within society. It was classified as a law that would be extended over time. It entails the government's strategy of establishing overarching standards in legislation and gradually broadening its application over time. The initial objective in 2003 was to mandate the law's alignment with the ADA (Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2006).

Simultaneously, the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the building regulations became more important. While existing laws already addressed the accessibility of newly built homes and public non-residential buildings, additional requirements were introduced for newly built non-public non-residential buildings. The regulations centered around six key aspects: toegankelijkheidssector (accessibility sector), toegankelijkheid (accessibility), vrije doorgang (free passage), verblijfsruimte (area of residence), toiletruimte (sanitary spaces), and badruimte (bathroom) (Ministerie van Volkshuisvesting, Ruimtelijke Ordening en Milieubeheer, 2002).

Finally, following years of efforts by the United Nations to reshape perceptions and strategies concerning individuals with disabilities, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was officially enacted in 2006. This document serves as a human rights instrument with a distinct focus on social development. It embraces a comprehensive definition of individuals with a disability, emphasizing the necessity for fully enjoying all human rights and fundamental freedoms. Moreover, it defines how various rights apply to individuals with disabilities, as well as instances of rights infringement demanding more protection and reinforcement (United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.-a). Despite numerous countries' swift signing of the UNCRPD following its enforcement, The Netherlands didn't sign until 2016. By signing the UNCRPD, they commit to attaining comprehensive accessibility, a commitment further strengthened by the implementation of "Besluit Toegankelijkheid" (Accessibility Act). This legislation focuses on five fundamental areas: raising awareness regarding accessibility in construction and renovation. Focusing on accessibility throughout the design and construction process. Establishing clear and widely accepted standards and guidelines with transparent disclosure. Ensuring an ample supply of appropriate housing options for individuals with disabilities, and heightening attention to accessibility in education programs (Ollongren, 2018). Figure 1 illustrates the chronological progression of Law Enforcement on disability rights.



1. Bigby, 2023 2. Lebrecht & Newnham, 2020 3. United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. b 4. ADA National Network, 2024
5. Tweede Kamer der Staten-Generaal, 2006 6. United Nations - Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d. a 7. Ollongren, 2018

Figure 1. Timeline illustrating the chronological progression of Law Enforcement on disability rights

Despite law enforcement measures being implemented late in The Netherlands, a closer analysis of Dutch society shows a longstanding focus on inclusivity. Figure 2 shows a photo taken at a protest in 1983 demanding improved accessibility to Amsterdam Central Station. The black and white image, sourced from the National Photo Archive, depicts individuals in wheelchairs protesting in front of the Amsterdam Central Station. The description explains the protest's aim to address the station's lack of accessibility. The image highlights the battle for accessible spaces and the existing fight within The Netherlands for more inclusivity.



Figure 2. Archival photo showing a protest against the lack of access for individuals with disabilities at Amsterdam Central Station in 1983 (Croes, 1983)

The first advocacy group for individuals with disabilities, named "Onderling Sterk" (Strong Together), was founded in 1985 by Roel Kok. Inspired by the activism of "People First" in the USA and UK, Kok saw a need for a similar organization in The Netherlands. Unlike "People First", his organization would focus on empowering individuals with disabilities rather than emphasizing their limitations. The organization aimed to demonstrate how those with insecurity and low self-esteem because of their disability could develop into individuals capable of expressing their desires and dislikes. This approach inspired the establishment of more organizations. In 2008, the "Coalitie voor Inclusie" (Coalition for Inclusion) was formed. Their mission was to promote social support for an inclusive society, advocate for inclusive policies, and combat exclusion. Their guiding principles included fostering a sense of welcome, empowering individuals, collaboration, proactive problem-solving, and optimism (van Gennep et al., 2014).

Moving beyond legislative and activist efforts, it is crucial to delve into the lived experiences of individuals navigating environments that systematically exclude them. This understanding highlights the urgent need for inclusive design and policies that prioritize inclusivity for these individuals. One significant social burden faced by those living with disabilities is the constant feeling of being observed and the pressure to explain themselves (Couser, 2009). Moreover, Egard et al. (2022) note that city centers often only implement incomplete inclusivity measures. This results in a world where individuals with a disability can only enter when assisted by staff or bystanders. Through a rhetorical analysis of how such 'solutions' are justified and normalized by professionals, Egard et al. demonstrates how common arguments like 'just as good' and 'the only way' persuade professionals and maintain inaccessibility. They also highlight how many adaptations are dismissed as 'ugly' or 'unthinkable' in certain contexts, reflecting a notion of purity that disability is perceived to disrupt a design or space.

Jeager (2018) identifies another common experience shared by individuals with disabilities: the widespread exclusion from broader discussions on diversity. In various social settings disability is largely overlooked in conversations about diversity. Numerous institutions look towards diversity as a commendable principle, advocating for broader inclusion across gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and sometimes other attributes. However, disabilities tend to be relegated to a mere compliance issue, rather than integrated into diversity initiatives. This distinction is critical as it leads to the continued neglect of individuals with a disability by many institutions. Moreover, the prevailing political atmosphere appears to increasingly promote indifference toward the needs of individuals with a disability.

Chapter 2 – The role of libraries

In contrast to the dismissive treatment of individuals with a disability, Jeager (2018) emphasizes that libraries have been an inclusive sector well before the implementation of any laws. The formation of the inaugural American Library Association (ALA) committee for services to individuals with disabilities in 1906 shows the libraries' national leadership role (in the United States) in advocating for the inclusion of individuals with disabilities. Moreover, in numerous places, libraries were known for their pioneering social or governmental institutions in acknowledging individuals with disabilities as valued members of their communities. This dedication to ensuring equity and access for individuals with disabilities was embraced within library frameworks long before it became a priority for the majority of other organizations and institutions. Providing collections for individuals with disabilities and the distribution occurred rapidly among libraries in the United States. Printed materials for the blind became part of many school library collections in the mid-1800s, and collections of materials in alternate formats were standard in larger public libraries by the early 1900s. Moreover, the formalized creation of collections of materials in Braille began widely in 1868. Talking books and machines were commonly available by the 1920s (Jaeger et al., 2015).

In contrast to the delayed formulation of inclusivity regulations in The Netherlands, libraries in The Netherlands were early adopters of inclusive practices. The book ‘Amsterdammers en hun bibliotheek’ by Lakmaker & Veldkamp (2019) emphasizes the pioneering role of the Public Library of Amsterdam, which was established in 1919. During the inaugural speech, the chairman of the board, Dr. H.F.R. Hubrecht, promised a collection of books in Braille for the blind community in Amsterdam. This department of the library was called the “Blindenbibliotheek” (Library for the Blind). Despite initially having less than a hundred titles in 1920, the collection could expand rapidly, with the help of 250 volunteers, to approximately 16,000 volumes by the 1950s. In 1955, the Public Library of Amsterdam transitioned to audio tapes due to the faster recording and copying processes compared to producing Braille books. In 1981, the “Blindenbibliotheek” ceased to exist, however, books and audio tapes were still available for lending through the “Studie- en Vakbibliotheek voor Visueel en Anderzins Gehandicapten (SVB)” (Study Library and Specialized Library for Visually and Other Disabled Individuals) (Lakmaker & Veldkamp, 2019).

The proactive approach by the library underlined the library's commitment to serving individuals with disabilities. The importance of this initiative is demonstrated in Figure 3. The image, in black and white, is sourced from the National Photo Archive and suggests its origin in the early fifties. It shows a young boy seated at a table with a Braille book. With closed eyes, he is ‘reading’ through his fingers. With his left hand, he traces the Braille in the book while simultaneously placing pins in a board with his right hand. When observing him you feel a sense of tranquility and focus. By placing the pins he is improving his understanding of Braille. It helps in remembering the position of the Braille dots and will make ‘reading’ easier (van Dijk, et al., 2022). The image underlines the significance of the availability of stories or knowledge accessibility through diverse means, enabling a broader audience to engage with them.



Figure 3. Archival photo showing a young boy reading through Braille (*National Archive, n.d.*)

Remarkably, libraries in The Netherlands also demonstrated significant involvement in disability communities and a commitment to inclusivity. An illustrative instance of a library design proposal that was rejected due to insufficient accessibility was featured in the newspaper *Nieuwsblad van het Noorden* (1989). The article states that the management of the Public Library of Groningen declined the proposed design, expressing concerns about the accessibility of the building. They noted that the entrance to the central hall would be too narrow and therefore would not provide accessibility to everyone. Unfortunately, the architect disagreed and was unwilling to make any alterations to the design (later on changes were made and the library was built (Leeuwarder Courant, 1989)). This case demonstrates that as early as 1989, stakeholders in the library sector were considering inclusivity and accessibility, despite resistance from an expert.

Bostick & Petrie (2009) shed light on the complexity of achieving inclusivity, accessibility, and usability within the libraries' role as an inclusive sector. In their analysis of modern academic libraries, they identified three primary challenges. Firstly, there's the issue of physical space, which encompasses everything from the layout of buildings to the arrangement of book stacks, desks, computer workstations, classrooms, study rooms, lounges, and even cafes. Secondly, ensuring the accessibility of the library's collection is crucial, spanning various formats such as books, documents, maps, electronic media, and more. Lastly, the services and programs offered by the library need to be accessible, including online catalogs, traditional card catalogs for older materials, information databases, technical support, reference services, and assistance. It's essential to ensure that the usability of these services and programs is maintained by avoiding unnecessary complexity and excessive detail, which can overwhelm users and hinder their ability to utilize them effectively. These challenges underline the significant obstacles libraries encounter in striving to provide accessibility for all. In response, the International Federation of Library Associations introduced the "Access to Libraries for Persons with Disabilities Checklist" in 2005. This practical tool enables libraries of various types to assess their current accessibility levels concerning buildings, services, collections, and programs, and to implement necessary improvements. The checklist is organized into three sections: physical access covering aspects such as exterior access, entry into the library, accessibility of the material, and services, the media formats which include specialized media for individuals with disabilities and computer accessibility, and service and communication encompassing staff training, specialized services for individuals with disabilities, methods of information dissemination, and collaboration with relevant organizations and individuals (Irvall & Skat Nielsen, 2005).

The requirements for a library according to the Dutch legislation are determined by its designated function within the library system. There are six specified library types: city central points, large locations, small locations, service points, mini-service points, education or care support points, and collecting/drop-off points. For instance, the distinction between a location and a service point, the two most common types, depends on several factors. A location must be open for a minimum of 15 hours per week, during which it should provide digital access to the entire collection, respond to questions, organize cultural and literary activities, and offer special facilities for education and other organizations. In contrast, a service point is only required to be open for 4 hours a week and unlike a location, organizing activities is not mandatory, and questions can be addressed either in person or online (Riedlová, 2015).

Libraries have historically led efforts in inclusivity for individuals with disabilities, offering specialized materials and services long before other institutions and any legislation. The Public Library of Amsterdam's "Blindenbibliotheek" and the Public Library of Groningen exemplify this commitment. Despite challenges and transitions, libraries have prioritized accessibility even though achieving inclusivity poses ongoing challenges. The journey towards inclusivity continues through collaborative efforts and innovative solutions. Resulting in libraries remaining welcoming environments where everyone can access knowledge and resources without any barriers.

Chapter 3 – The Public Library of Rotterdam

In 1604, the first library in Rotterdam was established in the Laurenskerk. From 1869, the Schielandshuis became the home of this publicly accessible library. From 1907 to 1923, the significantly expanded book collection found shelter in a former school building at Hogendorpsplein. When that building also became too small, it was decided to construct a new building at Nieuwemarkt. The new library, complete with storage space and reading rooms, was completed in 1923. The architect was D.B. Logeman and he was assisted by architects N. Lansdorp and J. Poot. The bombing of 1940 damaged the library, but it was practically intact, unlike buildings in the surrounding area that were destroyed by fire. This provided the board with the opportunity to expand the library for the ever-growing collection. In 1983, the library moved a short distance away to the new construction on the junction of Hoogstraat and Binnenrotte (Collectie Rotterdam - Gemeente Bibliotheek, Nieuwemarkt 1a, n.d.). Figure 4 illustrates the current location of the library within its surroundings, highlighting its prominent position in the area.

The grand opening of the Public Library of Rotterdam took place on October 9th, 1983 (Nieuwsblad van het Noorden, 1983). Over time, the library grew into Rotterdam's most popular cultural hub, welcoming 2.6 million visitors annually. The library features an extensive collection of 830,000 materials, facilitates 2.9 million loans, hosts numerous cultural events, and has a membership exceeding 100,000 subscribers (de Bibliotheek Rotterdam, 2024d).

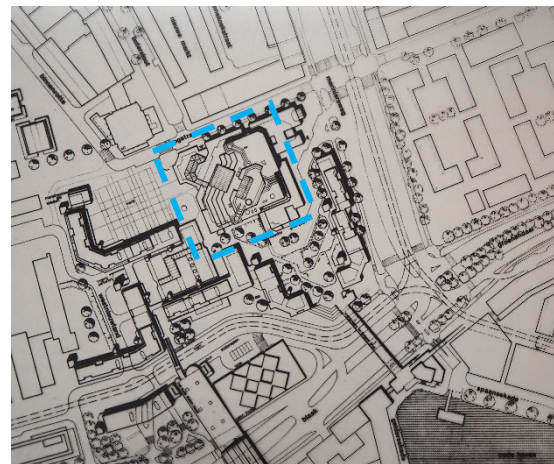


Figure 4. Public Library of Rotterdam located in its surroundings (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1983a)

For the design of the library, architects Jaap Bakema and Carel Weeber were asked by the municipality. After Weeber turned down an offer to work with the firm of Bakema, Van den Broek and Bakema, Bakema became determined to win this competition at all costs. Weeber and Bakema were permitted to nominate a member of the jury. They had agreed to propose a younger architect from their inner circle. Weeber chose Friso Broeksma, while Bakema intended to choose Wiek Röling. However, Bakema secretly selected Aldo van Eyck instead. Bakema was aware of a personal conflict going on between Weeber and Van Eyck which would make sure that Van Eyck would oppose Weeber's plan regardless. With Van Eyck as a member of the jury, no one could challenge him, resulting in Weeber losing the competition (Vollaard & Winkel, 2005). The specific architects responsible for the finished design of the library are Jaap Bakema and Hans Boot (Rotterdams Publiek, n.d.).

Their firm Van den Broek and Bakema played a significant role in the reconstruction of Rotterdam after World War II and the introduction of the modernist movement in Dutch architecture and construction 'Nieuwe Bouwen' (van Es, 2016). When examining the inclusivity and accessibility of the public library, it's worth mentioning that the firm had prior experience in designing for individuals with disabilities. Their portfolio includes the 1963 project "Het Dorp" (the Village) in Arnhem, a self-contained residential community exclusively for individuals with disabilities. This design marked a significant effort to humanize postwar architecture for this group (Liebermann, 2016). This illustrates that the firm knows how it can design inclusive buildings.

When designing the library the architects approached the design with a dual focus: prioritizing both the building's recognizability and aiming for an open atmosphere. This openness was achieved through two main strategies. Firstly, they avoided the use of large concrete columns that might obstruct the interior, opting instead for a void spanning all six levels and a cascading glass structure, connectivity between these levels is facilitated by escalators within this void, two core elevators, and multiple staircases. Figure 5 illustrates a perspective drawing created by the architects showcasing the view from the street passing by the library toward the library. Secondly, the architects envisioned the library not merely as a place to store books, but as a vibrant 'social-cultural information center' serving Rotterdam and its surrounding areas. Alongside a diverse collection, including books, newspapers, magazines, records, films, videos, audio tapes, and slideshows, the facility would host film screenings, coffee concerts, and performances by poets and writers. Additionally, the library would provide secluded study areas, conference rooms, and a restaurant. The space would also accommodate information and assistance services offered by organizations like the Red Cross and the municipality, as well as a "speel-o-theek" (play library) for children (de Lange, 1983).

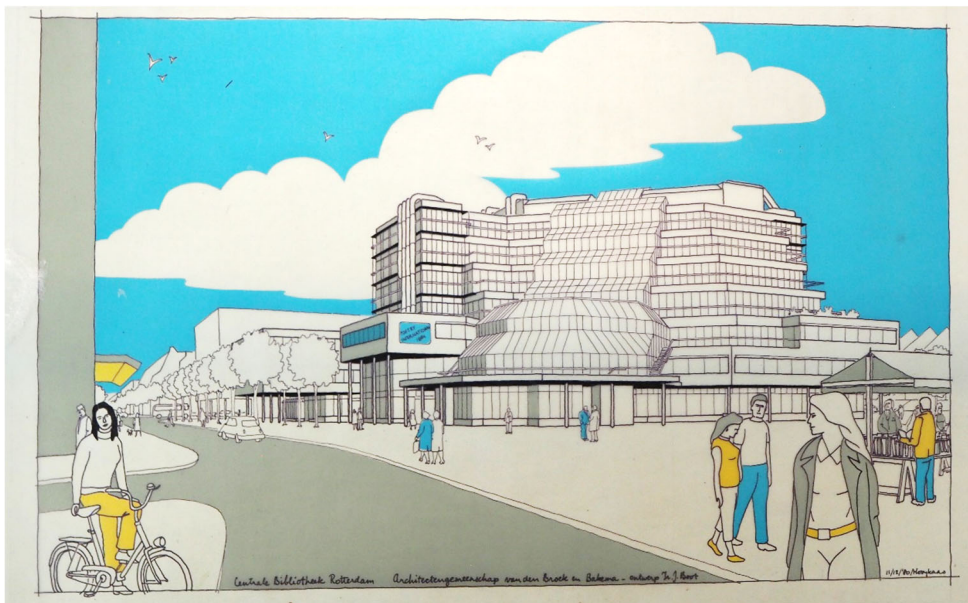


Figure 5. Illustration of the Public Library of Rotterdam (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1980)

The library's current mission is articulated as follows: "The Rotterdam Library aims to empower residents of Rotterdam to engage consciously, critically, and actively in society. The library accomplishes this by providing access to reliable knowledge and information, as well as organizing activities related to language, culture, and society. Offering these resources both physically and digitally, ensures accessibility for all. The library is a welcoming place for all, fosters enjoyable interactions, having fun, and acquiring the skills necessary for societal participation." (de Bibliotheek Rotterdam, 2024d). This mission underlines the library's ongoing dedication to creating an inclusive environment.

The level of inclusivity of the library will be analyzed in three categories; physical accessibility, the accessibility of the collection, and its role in society. Starting with the physical accessibility. While analyzing the 1983 drawings archived at The New Institute in Rotterdam, it became apparent that a few aspects of the design lacked physical accessibility. However, it is worth noting that the library has undergone modifications over the years to accommodate evolving visitor needs and comply with the updated (building) regulations.

One aspect showcasing a lack of physical accessibility in the design was the height of the reception counter at the entrance of the library. Figure 6 illustrates that the counter stands at a height of 970mm. Noticeably, current building regulations state that counters should have a maximum height of 1000mm. For wheelchair users needing to sign documents or interact at the counter, the maximum reachable height is 800mm (VACpunt Wonen, 2016). This implies that the counter height is very close to the maximum height, creating difficulties in effective communication with the receptionists. Moreover, reaching or signing documents becomes impossible at this height for someone in a wheelchair. This suggests that the counters either won't be used for document signing or that this aspect was overlooked during the design process.

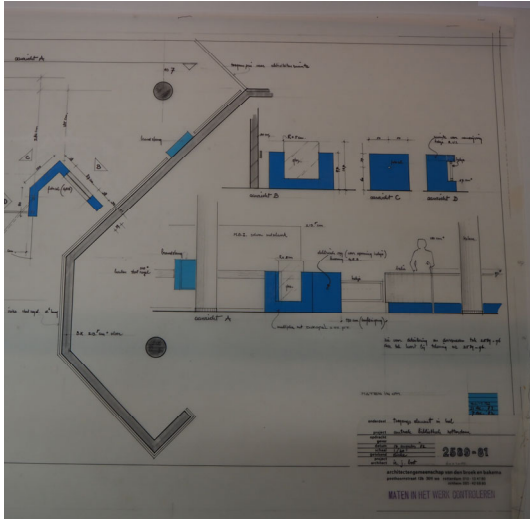


Figure 6. Design for the counter height of the reception at the entrance (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1982a)

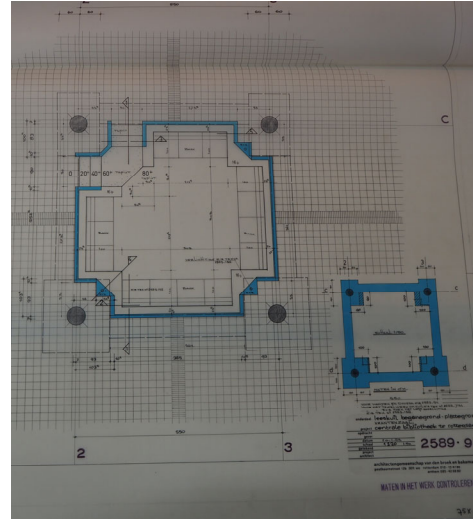


Figure 7. Design for a sunken seating area (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1983b)

Secondly, there was a design for a sunken seating area on the ground floor. Figure 7 shows that the seating area would only be accessible by four steps. As a result, it is inaccessible for wheelchair users and a significant challenge for those with physical or visual impairments. Consequently, this design actively excluded these groups from entering the sunken seating area. The incorporation of a sunken (or elevated) area in spaces aiming for inclusivity should be reconsidered, opting for accessibility via a ramp instead; otherwise, it presents significant accessibility issues.

Finally, the design for the restrooms on levels three through six doesn't show the presence of a toilet accessible for individuals in wheelchairs. Figure 8 displays the floor plan of level 5, highlighting the two restroom areas on this level, each containing four small toilet stalls and two sinks. Furthermore, figure 9 provides a detailed view of the restroom area design, confirming the absence of larger, wheelchair-accessible stalls. The absence of this kind of toilet implies that visiting the library would present a great challenge for someone requiring this type of facility, which is most likely an individual with a disability. As a result, these individuals must either plan their visit very well, utilize restrooms in another building, or pass on visiting the library altogether.

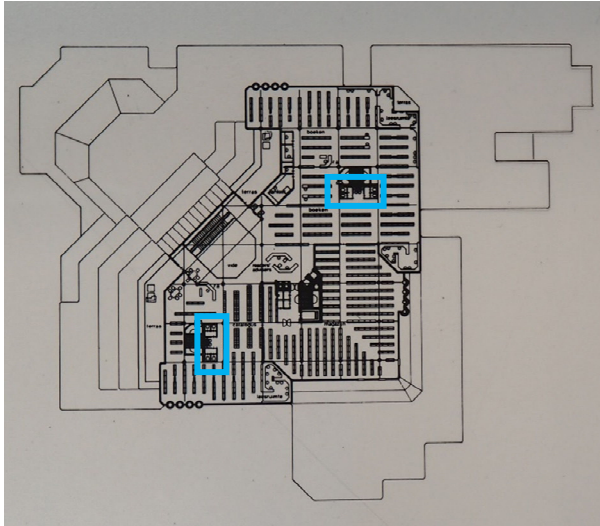


Figure 8. Floor plan level 5 highlighting small restroom areas (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1983a)

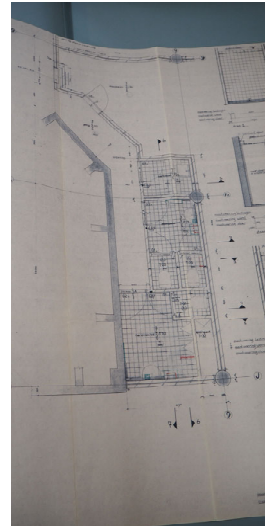


Figure 9. Close-up for design of the restrooms (Van den Broek en Bakema, 1982b)

However, it's important to acknowledge that despite the mentioned shortcomings, the overall accessibility of the building is admirable. This is attributed to the open layout of all levels, the generous entrance space, and the presence of escalators and elevators. It's worth noting that, given the absence of specific accessibility regulations during its building time, these features represent a significant achievement of inclusivity for everyone.

Analyzing the accessibility of the library's collection reveals significant advancements made by the library. The lending system has been fully automated since 1980, offering a straightforward process for borrowing books. Additionally, the library was the first public library in the Netherlands to implement an automated catalog system. Visitors could access information about books and authors through displays on every level. However, it's noteworthy that these displays were operated solely by touchscreens, lacking physical buttons (de Lange, 1983). Consequently, this poses challenges for visually impaired individuals, as there is no tactile feedback for interaction. Despite this limitation, as previously mentioned, the library has maintained a diverse collection since its establishment, ensuring accessibility to knowledge for a broad audience.

Reflecting on the library's mission demonstrates the continuous commitment to fostering inclusivity since its establishment and the ongoing improvement in this regard by the library. Presently, the library offers numerous services to assist those facing difficulties. Several examples, of catering to different groups and therefore playing a key role in society, will be highlighted. Firstly, the introduction of the "OrCam MyEye" in 2020 stands out. This wireless wearable device, roughly the size of a finger, can be attached to glasses with a magnet. It's designed for individuals who are blind, visually impaired, or have dyslexia or reading difficulties. Using artificial intelligence, the device can read printed and digital text in real time, resulting in direct accessibility to newspapers, books, computer and smartphone screens, restaurant menus, and more for these individuals (Bibliotheekblad, 2020). Secondly, accessibility for the physically impaired is enhanced by nearby parking, easily reachable lower bookcases, wheelchair-accessible toilets, and available assistance within the library (de Bibliotheek Rotterdam, 2024b). Thirdly, there's the "Rotterdamse netwerk Digitale Inclusie 55+" program, which provides education and support in digital knowledge for individuals over the age of 55, ensuring that everyone can participate in the digital society (de Bibliotheek Rotterdam, 2024c).

Finally, examining the library's societal role reveals its function as an information service aiming to facilitate the learning of or enhancement of the Dutch language. For Dutch language beginners, various courses are available along with a "Taalcafé" (Language Café), where participants interact over coffee or tea, while simultaneously improving their Dutch skills. For native speakers, there's a "Taalclub" (Language Club) focusing on improving reading and writing through reading texts, stories, challenging letters, and articles, as well as writing exercises such as filling out forms or composing letters or emails. Additionally, there's a "Leescafé" (Reading Café) where small groups gather to read together (de Bibliotheek Rotterdam, 2024a).

The highlighted efforts demonstrate the Public Library of Rotterdam's commitment to inclusivity and its mission to make knowledge accessible to all individuals, regardless of background or ability.

Conclusion

The thesis aimed to explore the influence of inclusivity on libraries and what insights the urban environment could learn from them. Thus, the central question addressed in the thesis is: *"How has the concept of inclusivity of the last 50 years influenced libraries, and how have libraries integrated the concept of inclusivity to make their buildings accessible for everyone?"*. The response comprises findings from sub-questions, culminating in an overarching conclusion.

The examination of the evolution of disability rights law provides the backdrop against which libraries operate, highlighting their efforts to foster inclusivity. The United States was the first country with legislation that dealt with equal rights for individuals with a disability starting with the Rehabilitation Act in 1973. In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted. Compared with The Netherlands, their first disability-specific laws were introduced in 2003 together with the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in the building regulations. Finally, following years of efforts by the United Nations to reshape perceptions and strategies concerning individuals with disabilities, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) was officially enacted in 2006. Even though the Netherlands didn't sign until 2016, by signing they committed to attaining comprehensive accessibility. This commitment was further strengthened by the implementation of "Besluit Toegankelijkheid" (Accessibility Act). The timeline combined with the lived experiences of individuals navigating environments that systematically exclude them, highlights the urgent need for inclusive design and policies that prioritize inclusivity for these individuals.

A closer look at the Dutch context reveals that libraries embraced materials catering to individuals with disabilities to create an inclusive environment since 1919. Despite legislation being enacted belatedly, inclusivity has long been ingrained in Dutch society. An analysis of the Public Library of Rotterdam, which was built in 1983, demonstrates this commitment to inclusivity. While initial shortcomings in physical accessibility were addressed over time according to the refinement of the building regulations, the library's provision of an accessible collection and support services was noteworthy for its era, still positively impacting the library.

Concluding, libraries played an important role in advocating for inclusivity for everyone before legal requirements, paving the way for other organizations and institutions to follow. This commitment creates a welcoming environment for individuals with disabilities, contrasting with many other aspects of their lives where exclusion remains a problem.

Furthermore, the design of the urban environment is vital for promoting inclusivity. This research offers a fresh perspective and encourages a more wholehearted embrace of inclusivity in our urban environment. Further studies should explore other sectors and have the potential to make a significant impact on urban spaces, fostering an equal and more inclusive world.

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