

My name is Camilla Ryhl and I am the Research Director at the Bevica Foundation.

I would like to talk a bit about the concept of universal design

and how universal design fits into the principle of 'leave no one behind' in the UN Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs.

The concept of universal design was originally coined by the American researcher and architect, Ronald Mace

as a response to how people were working with accessibility and barrier-free design in the American context.

Which is parallel to how we work with and practice accessibility, also sometimes called 'disability access' in a Danish context.

When working with accessibility, we often end up making special solutions for a certain specific user group.

And our offset is the basic requirements in the building codes or general regulatory framework.

Even if the intention is to be inclusive and ensure equal access for all, we often end up making special solutions, I mean, we end up making solutions that become stigmatizing and exposing to the individual user - even if the intention is the opposite.

It is fundamentally because we use a minority-based approach that we end up making special solutions.

The situation was originally the same in the American context when Ron Mace defined the concept of universal design as a reaction to it.

The concept was based on a recognition that living with impairments and various levels of ability throughout a lifetime is in reality something that we will all face.

It is not a question of 'them and us'.

It is a question of us.

Mace defined the concept as follows: "Universal design is the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

I have underlined "usable by all" because it is such a core element of the universal design concept.

It is about recognising that there is no ‘them and us’.

There is no need for - or it does not always make sense - to make special solutions for a certain user group.

Instead, when we design anything, we must base our work on the recognition that there is a very broad diversity of user needs and abilities and that is something we have in common as people.

We need to recognise this diversity and consider the whole body and the whole sensory apparatus and the whole physiology.

When doing this, we also include everyone.

So, fundamentally, the most important thing to understand about universal design is the view of human beings that is behind it.

I mean, the idea that we are not making special solutions for a special user group. We recognise that it is something that applies to all of us.

This is how the concept of universal design differs significantly from the concept of accessibility.

When we start by considering this broadness and high level of diversity in user needs, it also provides us with a new approach to designing for people.

In its simplest form, universal design is “design for human diversity”.

Instead of only focusing on impairments or disabilities, from a universal design point of view, we are just as much focusing on ability.

Because even if one is living with impairments or disabilities, you are also living with a lot of ability.

We all have different and varied abilities, and they can be stimulated.

From a universal design point of view, we can just as well work with stimulating our abilities instead of focusing on compensating for what we are missing.

We need to do both, but universal design allows us to both focus on stimulating and compensating.

In the same way, universal design also allows us to not only focus on the functionality, but just as much on our experiences.

Everyone needs to enter the space.

But it is just as important that everyone can stay in the space and participate in what is happening there and have access to all of the experiences and sensory impressions and stimuli that are offered in this space.

And also have access to the social activities and the community that is offered in that space.

And in this way, functionality and experience are equally important factors when working with universal design.

You could also say that 'diversity of user needs require diversity in solutions'.

An example of this is Schandorffs Plass, which is a little pocket park in the middle of Oslo in Norway.

Schandorffs Plass is characterised by being a small area with a 7-meter level difference from one end of the park to the other.

What they have done here is to create three different ways of moving through the park.

You can either use the stairs on one side of the park. This is a classic staircase.

You can follow the ramp which winds through the middle of the park.

And on the other side, there is also a bicycle path that you can use.

What makes this little park a great example of universal design is that there are three equal solutions. There is no 'main solution' and then an add-on.

There is no solution for the majority and then a special solution for a specific user group on one side.

There are three equal, well-integrated and dignified ways to use the park. That is what makes it a good example of universal design.

Universal design is a dynamic concept. Therefore, since Mace originally formulated the concept, it has been further developed and defined by various researchers and knowledge environments around the world.

For example, the American researchers Steinfeld and Maisel have long been working on understanding and defining universal design as a process concept.

And not like in Mace's original formulation, where the focus was more on specific solutions - they are also focused on working with it is a value-based process principle.

Steinfeld and Maisel have defined it as follows: "Universal design is a process that enables and empowers a diverse population by improving human performance, health and wellness and social participation."

In doing so, they are also moving the objective of working with the concept from a physical end product to increasingly being a general objective of health and wellness.

This aspect of being 'social participation' means that universal design can also be a tool whose end goal is to ensure social sustainability, social inclusion and ensuring equal participation in a social community.

By working with universal design as a process-based tool, we can help to ensure that we as individuals have long and healthy lives and are part of a community.

In this understanding of universal design, there is also an obvious opportunity to view universal design as a tool or lever to also work with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, which are in many ways focused on the same thing.

The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are fundamentally about ensuring a sustainable development.

However, the SDGs also recognise that sustainable development is only really sustainable if everyone is included.

In Denmark we all know about the 17 SDGs and many of us also work with them in our daily lives.

But across the 17 SDGs there is a fundamental principle, an obligation and a pledge that when working with these goals and the 2030 Agenda we commit ourselves to include everyone.

Everyone needs to be treated equally, have equal participation and be included in the work towards creating a sustainable future.

This is to ensure that no one is forgotten and that the difference between being included and excluded isn't increased.

But it is also a recognition that all resources, all talents and all people need to be included in the sustainable process and make equal contributions to ensure that we reach the goals and that the process is truly sustainable.

This, of course, also applies to people with varying levels of abilities, and there are many of those.

In Denmark, the figures state that at least 30% of the population between the ages of 16 and 64 are living with a self-assessed impairment.

On the global level, there are 1.3 billion people living with an impairment or disability.

So this is not a minority issue.

It is about all of us and if it is not about ourselves, then it is certainly about someone that we know.

Either someone in our family or someone that we work with or someone we go to school with.

It is about all of us.

At the same time, unfortunately, the figures also show that in a Danish context we are actually in a situation where people who live with a disability are left behind in some of the key everyday life factors, in life as a whole, in the life that is lived.

This is about access to public transport.

It is about the experience of having access to public buildings where the public life takes place.

It is about study programmes.

It is also about access to green spaces and nature.

It is about a lot of other factors as well, but here are just a few examples of how also in a Danish context there is a group in the population that is left behind.

And we need to focus on this group and ensure that they are included on a more equal and long-term basis in the experienced life - but we also need to ensure that they are included in our work with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Universal design can be a tool or lever to ensure that we include everyone.

Universal design in the sense of its basic principle that diversity of user needs requires diversity in solutions.

And we are not creating special solutions for a special user group, but we are doing it across a person's whole lifespan, across the framework of the experienced life, which reaches across not just the SDGs but also across sectors.

Because we do not live our lives in sectors. We live our lives in a context.

We leave our homes and take public transport to our place of study or work.

We hang out with our friends. We play sports.

We have different leisure activities.

We participate in cultural life.

We party hard during weekends and we live across sectors.

Therefore, the task also needs to be solved across many areas and this is what universal design can do with its view of humanity and its interdisciplinary potential.

Universal design can be a tool to ensure that the 'leave no one behind' obligation when working with the SDGs is not forgotten, but actually addressed.