

# A Dream Come True – the Accessible Office Building

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**Abstract.** The new office building of the Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities was taken into use in 2008. It is accessible and equal for all, and it did not cost more than any ordinary office building. It is a good reference in office planning: how to do good and accessible architecture with no extra costs. Succeeding in a project like this, however, requires lots of knowledge, wide views and a strong will.

**Keywords.** Accessibility, architecture, construction costs, design, design for all, flexibility, office building, universal design

## Introduction

The aim of the new office building project was to encourage Finnish office culture towards the provision of structural spaces offering greater support in the workplace for people with a disability. Of course the Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities (FPD) needed new facilities. And self-evidently they should be designed according to the principles of universal design. At the same time the kind of working environment model is created which can be used as a general reference in office planning while also serving to removing obstacles to the employment of people with a disability. This is the first of its kind in Finland – and probably in the world.

## 1. The Design Criteria

To guarantee the realization of universal design principles following six main design criteria of FPD's office building were established in the beginning of the project planning phase.

**Universal applicability:** All facilities have to be suitable for all users, from private workstations to social rooms, from the common lunch restaurant to the kitchenettes on every floor. Workstations can be flexibly added, removed or combined when needed.

**Accessibility:** The Accessible Office Building is located with good transport links on Mannerheimintie, the main street in Helsinki. The office can be reached by accessible public transport. It is also possible to use private cars. The garage is on three floors under the office building and there is direct access to the building from the garage via lifts. 26 % of the parking spaces are designed for people with special needs.

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All the entrances have automatic doors and they are, of course, accessible and can be used by anyone. The lifts are big, carrying 17 people or 1275 kg, the two main lifts are pass-through lifts. The lifts have an audio announcement system.

All toilet facilities are accessible and gender neutral. They are one-sided accessible and always in pairs, as mirror image to each other. In addition each floor has one extra spacious toilet facility with electrically height-adjustable toilet seat and care table.

**Ease of orientation:** The environment is easily comprehensible. For instance, every floor has colour codes that are logically located in the same place on each floor. Specific functions are always located in the same place on each floor, even though the floors are very different.

**Managing the working environment:** The work places are partly located in private rooms, partly in open-space office, according to the employees' needs and the work they do. E.g. the heating, lighting and sound insulation systems are planned in a way that enables eventual changes from open-space offices to private rooms and vice versa to be easily and flexibly accomplished.

All work place furnishings allow generous adjustment. All desks are electrically height-adjustable and wide, and the location of work place furnishings can easily be changed.

**Safety:** The whole office building has a sprinkler system and a fire alarm system comprehending unique addresses. The lifts are back-uped with battery power. In the case of an emergency people with assistive devices will be evacuated to the many balconies of the building.

**Economic efficiency:** The construction of the accessible office building did not cost more than of a conventional office building. A particular attention was paid on the costs of the solutions during the planning phase.

## 2. Users' involvement

To ensure the accessibility a user group was involved and it played a very active role in the planning during the whole planning time. The user group consisted of employees and FPD's board members. The architect presented the drawings to the users' group, all details and products were carefully studied and selected together with the group. Several full scale models of the working environment were built and all employees and people involved in the planning could visit and test use and evaluate them. Even prototypes e.g. from the desk was built before the final decisions.

## 3. We did it!

When the building was ready and we moved in we found out that it really fulfilled our dreams: it looked good, it really was accessible and equal for all of us. And it did not cost more than was expected.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 2008 the president of Finland, Mrs. Tarja Halonen, inaugurated officially the Accessible Office Building of the Finnish Association of People with Physical Disabilities. There she declaimed: "This accessible office building provides a working environment which is suitable for all employees and visitors despite one's limitations. I hope this will be general model of accessible construction for the future office and workplace design practice."