

The Eighth Principle of Universal Design

~ Written for the Design Institute of India ~

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In 1997 the North Carolina State University's Center for Universal Design copyrighted The Principles of Universal Design, Version 2.0. The seven brilliantly crafted principles with which you are familiar are:

1. Equitable Use
2. Flexibility in Use
3. Simple and Intuitive
4. Perceptible Information
5. Tolerance for Error
6. Low Physical Effort
7. Size and Space for Approach and Use

An eighth principle would be a welcome and needed entry to this honorable list. Rather than only define the physical experience and environment of a user as it does, this eighth principle would address perception; those shared by the observer and the observed. How do we see others and how do they see us? Can we build in a way that levels the perceptual playing and establishes a field in which all players are seen more closely as equal?

I was recently asked if the New York City subways should be cleaner. As a life long resident of New York, I balked at this absurd notion. I adore our grittiness. This is my rough, nasty and harsh city and nobody is supposed to clean it up. A grimy subway is normal and is stable measure of our urban humanity. If you show up dirtier than the subway, you really are a mess. If you took a few minutes to clean up, you are already better than most. And if you dress sharp, you are king – something to be looked at and admired. That's me; I like to look good. The subway makes me look good with little effort. Clean it up and my habits and standards appear to lower. Pretty silly, eh? But don't we all play such silly games? You have a look, your look; you like and maintain that look. You measure how you look against how others look. You wear sweaters or jackets; buttoned shirts or t-shirts. They are reflections of your identity and they are the image you wish to project.

But suppose one morning you woke up, slumbered over to your closet and discovered not a stitch of familiar cloths. In your closet were cloths that were the wrong color, the wrong material, the wrong look and fit. Now what? You can't go out naked so you dress with what's there. You head out into a world completely unsure of yourself. Everything is wrong. You don't fit in. Friends all wonder what happened to you. People react differently, better or worse. How you see yourself and how

others see you has been altered simply by cloths different from those you would normally wear.

This example of dress is a metaphor for the design of our homes, cities, and products, and how we “fit” in them; it is also a metaphor for when our mobility is altered, temporarily or permanent. If we feel comfortable, the experience is positive, if not, the experience is negative. There is an emotional landscape we manage as much as the physical one. Our condition, and the condition of our environment, affect this emotional landscape; they exaggerate differences or support equality.

The Eighth Principle would acknowledge the importance of an environment supporting perceptual equality. A universally designed environment would support positive perceptions by others and of ourselves. We would appear and feel equal as we face our daily challenges. There would be no moment when an environment or product puts us in a place where we are perceived as different and must manage or endure emotional consequences that otherwise wouldn't be there.

Let's look at a uniquely American example, presidential candidate height. Betting on the winning candidate? Place your bet on the taller one! Since the advent of television, 75% of American elections were won by the taller candidate.

What about the blonds? Do blonds have more fun? Ask a convert, the answer is yes. An acquaintance in her 60's went from gray hair to blond kicking and screaming that this wild experiment was not who she really is. Since the change in hair color, she has determined that there is no going back. Blonds do have more fun!

Subway grime? Cloths? Height? Hair color? What does this have to do with universal design? They are perceptions we form of ourselves and of others. They are part of the judgments we make a billion times a day. Some of these judgments are self-formed and others handed to us by our families and the cultures we live in.

Judgments, which form the foundation of our daily decision making, are further informed and adjusted by the present situation. Driving a car is a useful example: You learn the skills needed to drive, yet every road is different and requires immediate judgments for the situation at hand.

Back to the example of taller presidents: Our judgments of height subtly tell us that tall is better, tall is more powerful, and tall is more authoritative. Shorter candidates struggle with this perception and constantly seek adaptations to equalize the influence of height over voter perception. Herein lies the essence of the Eighth Principle, can we build in a way that reduces or eliminates those judgments? Can our environments and products allow us to appear more equal to others, reducing or eliminating biased perceptions, than the way we presently design them?

In December, 2008 President elect Barak Obama announced members chosen to be on his green team. I watched the press conference and saw something unusual as a result of a rare camera angle. When it was Nancy Sutley's turn at the podium, the camera shot switched from the rear of the room to the side of the stage. Ms. Sutley is quite short. I watched as President Elect Obama moved forward and using his foot, nudged a stepping stool into position for her. The gesture was personal; they shared a glance that was endearing and which acknowledged the caring forethought. Seen from the camera at the back of the room, one saw nothing other than one person turning over the podium to another.

With these extra inches to stand on, she presented her speech in no way marginalized by her shorter physical stature. Without these extra inches, she would barely peer over the podium, or, would have stood to its side, an action that would have unfairly singled her out from the other speakers and induced judgments base solely on physical stature.

By recognizing that it is in our nature to be judgmental and that environment influences the judgments we make at every moment, I assert that in addition to the seven principles that equalize the mechanics of a physical environment, we can add a principle that calls attention to the emotional ones.

Here would be principle eight:

8. Principle Eight: Perception of Equality –
The design minimizes the possibility of an individual being perceived as unequal.

THE END

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