The Age of (In)Accessibility shows how lack of accessibility shapes our everyday experiences – not only in public spaces, but also in relationships, work, education and culture. The exhibition consists of a dozen objects symbolising exclusion in areas such as architecture, design, communication, the support system, culture and professional life. The exhibition shows that accessibility is more than just removing physical barriers – it is a matter of empathy and social responsibility. It encourages a change of perspective and raises awareness that creating a world that is open and accessible to everyone is beneficial to society as a whole. It is an invitation to dialogue and a call to action.

The exhibition was created in partnership with the National Museum in Kraków, where it was on display from January to the end of April this year. It was the focus of the nationwide social campaign 'The Age of Accessibility' organised by the Avalon Foundation and co-financed by the National Disabled Persons Rehabilitation Fund (PFRON). Its goal was to make the public aware of what lack of accessibility means and how everyone is involved in the creation of barriers for people with disabilities.

The campaign was carried out in partnership with the Nie Do Ogarnięcia Agency. Now, thanks to the involvement of Młyny Rothera in the project, we are showing it once again – in Bydgoszcz.

Fashion that does not match

Fashion inaccessible to people with disabilities
From the life of Monika Tworzydło

The juxtaposition of a typical orthopaedic shoe with fashionable high heels highlights the gap that separates the world of fashion from creating attractive solutions for everyone. Fashion has always been a form of manifesto and expression. Monika's story shows the problem of ignorance and the fashion market's failure to adapt to the needs of people with disabilities:

For me the biggest challenge has always been finding the right shoes — ones that are functional, comfortable and attractive. As a child, I was ashamed to wear orthopaedic shoes. Other children had colourful shoes, and I was always stuck with heavy, ugly models that only emphasised that I was different. Fortunately, I could count on my mother's creativity. She bought several pairs of lightweight foam flip-flops, which a shoemaker then joined together to form the missing 10 centimetres in the sole. This allowed me to wear shoes that not only served their purpose, but were also lightweight and looked more like the shoes other children wore. Unfortunately, this problem still exists in my adult life. The materials offered by orthopaedic footwear manufacturers are often too heavy, which makes the shoes uncomfortable and impractical. Furthermore, it means high costs and long lead times. Sometimes the shoes I receive are poorly made — they have traces of glue on them and their appearance leaves much to be desired. However, the lack of accessibility in fashion does not end with shoes and affects every branch of the industry. Educating fashion design students about the barriers and needs of people with disabilities is vital for change to happen. This will make their designs much more inclusive and respond to the real needs of different users.

Temporary employee's mug

Barriers in the professional life of a person with disabilities
From the life of Aneta Koszyczek

Employees who have settled into their workplace often have a favourite mug, which is a kind of symbol of acceptance and stability. For many people with disabilities, however, this experience remains foreign. Disposable paper cups juxtaposed with ceramic mugs symbolise the temporary nature of employment and the exclusion of people with disabilities from the labour market.

The story of Aneta, who uses a wheelchair due to a congenital spina bifida, illustrates the exclusion that people with disabilities often face at work:

'Temporary employee' and 'intern' are terms that have become permanently associated with people with disabilities. Many companies offer internships with false promises of employment. Then, when the internship ends, they say goodbye to the intern and find someone new. In my case, it was a little different – I did get a job, but right from the start, my employer was reluctant to assign me specific duties. My colleagues behaved as if I were only there 'for a while'. They ignored me at company celebrations, birthdays and joint outings. Theoretically I was an employee, but not a fully-fledged one. After some time, I received my notice of termination by email. The main reason given by my employer was that my position had been made redundant. What hurt me the most was that he didn't bother to inform me in person.

Chaos stop 03

Information and communication barrier
From the life of Szymon Grzech

Does the timetable seem incomprehensible to you? Every day, many people with special needs find themselves at their own 'Chaos Stop 03'. It is a barrier that prevents them from reading or understanding information correctly. Small letters, official language, lack of subtitles, lack of a sign language interpreter, lack of audio description and Braille subtitles are just some of the challenges faced by people with disabilities. Among them is Szymon:

My name is Szymon. I am 30 years old and I have Down syndrome. I live in Kraków. I work in a café. I can get around the city on my own using public transport and I handle many areas of life well, but... sometimes I travel alone to visit my friend in Opoczno. Unfortunately, I always need someone to help me get on the train or bus and then pick me up. There are two reasons for this. The first is that I have difficulty communicating at the station. Once, when I arrived at the station, it turned out that my train was arriving at a different platform. Unfortunately, the announcement over the loudspeaker was unclear and quiet, so I did not hear it. In addition, the letters on the information boards are too small for me to read. The second reason is problems with the train doors. Although most carriages have sliding doors, there are still some with handles, which are often faulty. I cannot open them myself, so someone always has to wait for me and help me.

THE EXHIBIT WAS CREATED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE PUBLIC TRANSPORT MANAGEMENT BOARD.

We wish to thank the Public Transport Management Board in Kraków for their help in creating the exhibit 'Chaos Stop 03'.

We wash our hands of

Barriers in the design of accessible spaces and facilities
From the life of Katarzyna Dinst

A washbasin mounted too high is one of many real examples of facilities and solutions that are not adapted to users with different needs.

The story of Kasia, a coach and accessibility educator who is a person of short stature, shows the mistakes and shortcomings in the broadly understood design process:

A high washbasin is a challenge for me. When I use the toilet and then want to wash my hands, I often get the upper part of my chest wet when leaning over the washbasin. Then I have to perform in front of people with my wet shirt. That is why I use the accessible toilet, and in particular the washbasin, before various performances. Accessible space is not just for senior citizens, wheelchair users or parents with prams, it is for everyone. In Poland, there are many places that 'wash their hands of' by claiming to be accessible to everyone, but in reality do not meet the needs. An example? There is an accessible toilet in the building, but to get to it, you have to climb stairs. There are also companies that believe that solutions that ensure 'accessibility' are not worth adopting because their services are not used by customers with disabilities. This is not true. Barriers appear first in the minds of those in charge of the project and then in the space, so it is worth changing the thinking and inviting people with special needs to consult and co-create the reality.

Exclusion

Obstacles to meeting basic physiological needs
From the life of Bogumiła Siedlecka-Goślicka

The closed door to a toilet and the instruction on how to get the key to open it prove the lack of imagination of the building's managers. This is a violation of every human being's right to have their basic needs met.

The story of Bogumiła, who suffers from congenital bone fragility and uses an electric wheelchair, shows the barrier faced by people with disabilities who want to use the accessible toilets:

Using the toilet is something natural, something that is often forgotten. For people with disabilities, it is different. When I am in a public place and feel that it is 'time to go to the toilet', I wonder if I am going to make it in time. Why? Because toilets are very often locked and you have to start looking for someone who has the key. Once I was at a clinic for an examination and needed to use the toilet, but unfortunately the man who had the key was... on holiday, and he had taken the key with him. You might think that this is a unique situation. Unfortunately, it is not. Accessible toilets are often locked, cluttered or occupied by non-handicapped people. I have seen toilets with a large sign saying 'for privileged people'! It's sad. After all, we are talking about basic vital functions, not privileges! Everyone has physiological needs. Unfortunately, many people with disabilities, including myself, often limit their consumption of liquids and food in public places so as not to have to look for an accessible and open toilet.

EXHIBIT DESIGNED BY:

Karina Majchrzak, Anna Nowokuńska-Maksymiuk and Katarzyna Waszak – participants of the UNIfest workshops held as part of the Sensitive Culture Festival. During the event, consultants and experts with disabilities worked together with designers representing selected fields of design to create buildings that would best reflect the character of the titular 'Age of (In)Accessibility'.

No comment

Information and communication barrier
From the life of Filip Gałązka

What does the world look like to a deaf person for whom subtitles are a key tool for understanding reality? Experience the everyday life of Filip, who was born hearing but became deaf. This video shows the protagonist communicating in Polish Sign Language, and a part of the material has no subtitles.

Writing is a record of a phonetic language, and letters are graphic symbols for sounds, which means that for people who have been deaf since birth, learning to write is like learning a foreign language. Polish Sign Language, on the other hand, is a spatial language with its own grammar, which is difficult for hearing people to understand. Living in a culture dominated by hearing people can be difficult, as Filip's story illustrates:

Without subtitles or a sign language interpreter, I cannot understand much of the content online and on television, including live broadcasts. While some channels offer sign language interpretation, these are exceptions rather than the norm. I also encounter difficulties in everyday communication. Offices, banks and clinics do not have interpreters or communication support systems, and employees do not understand what I want to tell them. I have to rely on the help of relatives or friends. Access to everyday information is also a challenge. Sometimes, when important messages appear — weather alerts, announcements of services — they are not adapted to deaf people. This makes me feel excluded from social life.

I disappear from my own life

Depriving a person with a disability of their right to independence
From the life of Agnieszka Kizinkiewicz

The photograph shows the protagonists of the Avalon Foundation's 'Age of Accessibility' campaign. Agnieszka is missing because she was unable to participate in the filming that day because her personal assistant was not available. The figure cut out of the photograph symbolises invisibility, deprivation of the right to independence and participation in social life.

The general perception is that placing a sick, severely disabled or elderly person in a Nursing Home is an expression of concern for the safety and comfort of that person, but also for the comfort of family and loved ones. In many cases, however, this is a violation of the right to independent living, as illustrated by Agnieszka's story:

The biggest barrier is people's hearts. It hurts me a lot when people or institutions see only a problem, when they encounter a sick or disabled person. It hurts me when they do not treat me like a human being. They do not ask for my opinion or how I feel, they just persuade or try to force me to go to a nursing home for their own so-called peace of mind. I do not want to disappear and give up my life because someone else decided so. My main dream is to have a guarantee of Personal Assistance, i.e. constant support from someone who would make it easier for me to live in my own home with my beloved cat Monia and live according to my own rules. I want to leave the house, deal with administrative matters, choose what I want to wear. I am not the only one waiting for this support. We should all fight for a change in the law and the system, so that in the end it is people, not institutions, who are the most important.

Repertoire of barriers

Lack of accessibility in culture
From the life of Renata Orłowska

The poster shows the cultural barriers experienced by people with disabilities. The story of Renata, an activist and advocate for people with disabilities who uses an electric wheelchair, illustrates the barriers that prevent her and other people with special needs from participating in culture:

I have lived with a disability since childhood and it is part of my identity. I have been working for people with disabilities for years, but I am tired of educating people that the rights of people with disabilities are human rights and that these rights are notoriously violated, also in terms of access to culture. I often encounter double standards, and the doors to the world of culture, which should be open to everyone, are only slightly ajar for people with disabilities. It is not just about physical barriers, such as the lack of ramps or lifts in theatres and cinemas. Places for wheelchair users are usually right in front of the screen, there is no audio description for the blind, subtitles or sign language interpretation for the deaf. Culture is not only about reception, but also about active participation. There is still not enough talk about people with disabilities being not only spectators but also creators. We are tired of pretending and making the 'cripple make'! The doors to acting schools and the creative world are closed to us. Non-handicapped artists tell our stories and win awards for them, while we remain in the shadows, deprived of the right to representation. Enough of stealing our stories and experiences. The non-handicapped mainstream promotes itself on our disability, and culture becomes a place of exclusion instead of a space for joint creation. This is disgraceful and degrading for the entire society, which in this way loses the opportunity for true diversity, understanding and dialogue.

Chilling receipt

Financial barriers in the life of a person with a disability
From the life of Aneta Koszyczek

The symbolic 'Chilling receipt' illustrates the typical expenses of a person with a disability who, like every citizen, has to deal with daily living costs, inflation, price increases and unexpected costs. And these are just some of the challenges. The need to purchase medicines, specialised equipment and physiotherapy support are essential expenses that cause constant financial problems and, as a result, make it impossible to lead a safe, stable and dignified life.

The story of Aneta, who is wheelchair-bound due to a congenital spina bifida, illustrates the problem of expenses faced by people with disabilities:

The biggest challenge for me is the constantly increasing cost of living. Even though I work, it is difficult for me to support myself. Constant checks by the authorities to make sure that I do not earn more than I should. No chance of promotion or development, because I would earn more and lose my disability pension. People's belief that people with disabilities have 'lots of money' because the state 'gives' us so much. All this makes me sad and frustrated, but also causes constant stress. I would like to live like everyone else, buy a flat, have a child in the future, grow, but in the current state of affairs this is not possible.

EXHIBIT DESIGNED BY:

Adrianna Król, Ewa Loge and Kacper Nadolski — participants of the UNIfest workshops organised as part of the Sensitive Culture Festival. During the event, consultants and experts with disabilities worked together with designers representing selected fields of design to create buildings that would best reflect the character of the titular 'Age of (In)Accessibility'.

Urban obstacle course

Barriers in urban space
From the life of Kamil Najdrowski

Architectural accessibility is not just about lifts and well-designed ramps. It is about the ability to reach any place safely and comfortably. It is about routes that can be travelled independently.

Cities often turn into a kind of obstacle course. Uneven pavements, high kerbs, protruding manhole covers and loose paving slabs are just some of the barriers in the urban jungle that do not necessarily disappear after repairs. At night it is even more difficult – obstacles visible in daylight disappear in the darkness.
Kamil Najdrowski's story shows that despite the greatest strength and determination, these smallest elements of the urban puzzle become the biggest barriers:

I ride over uneven, large stones. Not to test myself, but because sometimes there is no other way. In the city centre, getting around in a wheelchair is sometimes an extreme sport. I have strength and experience – I compete in marathons, half marathons and handbike competitions. I won Wings for Life 2025 in Poland with the longest distance. I am the Polish Vice-Champion in Duathlon for people with disabilities. I stand on the podium of the biggest street races in Poland – from Warsaw to Poznań. But even I can be stopped by the city. What about those who have weaker hands? Those who are just learning to be independent? How can we encourage professional, cultural and social activity when even travelling to the venue is a barrier?

Endless stairs

An architectural barrier for people with disabilities
From the life of Michał Figurski

Stairs are one of the most visible architectural barriers for people with disabilities, parents with prams and people with injuries. They can become an insurmountable obstacle. They also symbolise a path — a passage between spaces — which remains inaccessible without support or appropriate facilities. A journey like that can resemble a never-ending struggle for basic rights and recognition.

The story of Michał Figurski, a journalist who suffered a haemorrhagic stroke several years ago, shows that accessibility concerns everyone, regardless of their current state of health:

I have been a comfort-loving person for most of my life. Whenever possible, I avoided stairs, which I associated with tedious necessity and unproductive effort, and instead used lifts. Everything changed when I had a stroke. Since then, my life has become much more strenuous, and facing difficult challenges has become part of my everyday routine.
I quickly had to realise that there are no shortcuts in life and that stairs are often the only way to reach your goal. Today my goal is not only to reach higher floors, but also to have the ability to move freely and independently on the ground floor. I try to make others aware that life can change in a second. One day you are the king of the world, the next you lose control of your leg, your head, your body. You never know when 'stairs' will appear in your life, so it is worth taking action now to make it easier for everyone to take steps upwards.

Fallen scooter

Barrier in public space
From the life of Adrian Now

'A fallen scooter' is a symbol of the lack of imagination of users of electric scooters and other means of transport, which can get in the way of the safe and efficient movement of all users of public space.

Adrian, who is blind, describes the problem faced by people with special needs when using public space:

Electric scooters abandoned in the wrong places are a big problem. Left on pavements or paths, they pose a real threat to people with visual and mobility impairments. When moving around with a white cane, I rely on detecting obstacles in my path. Unfortunately, scooters lying on the ground or leaning against other objects are difficult to spot in time, which leads to tripping and even falls. This situation not only threatens our safety, but also affects our sense of confidence when moving around the city independently. To improve this situation, it is essential to educate scooter users and introduce more restrictive regulations on parking scooters. Shared responsibility for public space can make cities more friendly and accessible to all residents, no matter the level of their mobility.