

Europeans' ageing – Opportunity for the lift industry?

Conclusion speech – by Jürgen Reuning – President ELA

Thanks to Christian de Mas Latrie for his presentation of what the lift industry can technically “align”, to contribute to the total accessibility of the built environment. The solutions exist for full horizontal and vertical accessibility. With a better understanding by architects, of the needs of the ageing population as Mrs Häussler – Sczepan has demonstrated to us, I am sure that all new buildings in the future will be better equipped and made fully accessible.

We must by the way, go back to the Commissioner for Social Affairs, to kick off the preparation of the course that the Commission Expert group on People with disabilities recommended and which is endorsed by the Commission; a course in all languages, that will be proposed to architecture schools around Europe. We all know of course that national governments run their Education system the way they want and that Europe can't impose anything in the curriculum of young architects, as they exist in architects schools. Still, if that European course on Total accessibility is well done, with the help of all involved and under the leadership of the Architects' Council of Europe, we are sure that its attractiveness with CD and DVD included, will make it a success.

The course could be largely based on advanced presentations like the “Design for all” course developed by the ANLH in Belgium or on the “Universal design” course existing in all architects' schools in Denmark. Food for thought,... but we can not let go. We must ask the next Commissioner of Social Affairs, a follow up on Mrs Diamantopoulou's projects.

It must be one of the results of the “Year of People with Disabilities” (too few results in our opinion), to avoid that the Commission's slogan “A society fully accessible by 2010” remains an empty slogan. As we have repeatedly said, the disabled are the “vanguard” of us all in terms of

accessibility. One could reduce the issue of the ageing society to the issue of people with disabilities since old age means reduced vision, bad hearing, difficulties to move about, etc... These are clearly interlinked issues.

Now, all this deals mostly with new buildings. But we all know that the real quandary is the question: can existing buildings, especially residential buildings, be made fully accessible? How do we go about it?

Europeans are getting old, they live longer, much longer. Life expectancy at birth is above 81.3 for women and 74.8 for men. This is only an average ! It means we will have many centenarians among us in 20 years time.

Old people want to stay home. It is a cheaper solution for the State in most cases, even taking into account the fact that they will need help at home, from nursing services to social visits. It is cheaper – whatever the calculation method - than systematically putting old citizens in health institutions.

Now, if we look at the existing building stock, we see that many buildings, mostly residential ones with 3, 4 or even 5 levels and more are without lifts ! Legislation differs per country, but also often per region, länder, province, canton or city! There should be a common approach on this.

Apartment buildings should never be built without a lift. Moreover, it is a “plus” for the owner, and will be even more so in the future. There is a subtle evolution: in the South of France or in Brittany for example, new condominiums being built show that it is older people who buy the more expensive top floors. The lift becomes a real demand from the affluent ageing population.

Solutions can imply gangways at the top floors, to assemble as many as 15 flats per lift in long seafront buildings for example. Promoters even consider that the added selling price of the top floor compensates for the cost of the whole lift.

Few lifts maybe, but lifts nevertheless, that avoid the use of stairs,... Stairs which are the part of any building where most accidents happen.

New buildings should all – including individual homes – have at least space reserved for a lift, if the buildings are 2 levels or more. The cost is much higher,

As we said earlier, architects' schools curricula should all have a course on total accessibility, linked to handicap and ageing.

On the side of the lift industry, we have developed the YEBA concept: "Your Easy Building Access". Total accessibility is a must and we promote it by conjugating

- State incentives in the form of detaxation or grants
- The creation of an accessibility label: not a limited accessibility label for the Walloon region in Belgium or a European label for hotels along the Mediterranean coast... No. Labels can only function if they are widely accepted and recognized by all, especially the disabled. It should be a European label.
- Long periods for adapting the buildings, when feasible (and in most cases, it is feasible), of 5, 10 or 15 years, depending on the issue (new installation or modernisation).

All residential building access should be smooth and effortless for all, in an inclusive society. The need is there to make existing buildings accessible

Easily said, but how can it be done?

There are solutions; technology helps to make it possible. We have machine room less lifts, compact solutions, etc...), but of course most cases are very specific and demand tailor-made solutions.

Let me give a few examples:

- 1) Lifts can be built inside the stairwell, by reducing the width of the stairs and using the central space with a compact lift solution. There, in most cases, the feasibility of such a solution depends of the local firemen demands, in terms of stair width. The Finnish firemen tolerate 80 cm-wide stairs for accessibility and evacuation purposes, while German firemen demand in most cases a stair-width of 1 full metre. We should obviously try to get harmonisation of the fire safety demands and balance the advantages of a narrower stair with the need to have evacuation stairs for the fire brigade.
- 2) A lift can replace the stairs and fill the stairwell completely. In this instance, stairs must be built on the outside of the building, usually at the back of the residential building. This solution can be an evacuation stair,

a “light” solution compared with what existed previously, prior to the installation of a standard lift.

- 2) Lifts can be built outside the building, at the back, leaving the stairwell as it is (in historical buildings for ex.).

A lift must always respect essential safety norms. To us, even what is wrongly called a “home lift” today; I mean a low traffic lift, which functions mostly or only in the morning and at night when the inhabitants come back home, must scrupulously follow the Lift directive safety rules. Platform lifts, reserved to the use of people with heavy disabilities should not be used by others, especially children without the maturity to understand the way the lift works. That is why the European Lift Association is developing the concept of “low traffic lift”, LULA: low use, low application. The low traffic lift should be faster than the platform reserved to the disabled at 0.15 m/sec. It could circulate at a speed of 0.30 m/sec for example and respect the lift directive instructions, but be more affordable for installation in residential buildings and individual homes.

It is true that price and costs issues are of course tantamount. Even well-off, old-age citizens would hesitate installing a lift if it costs the price of a Ferrari. The price of a car is acceptable to most as a benchmark.

There are other issues, making a new installation in an existing building difficult:

- the lack of space and higher costs of transforming the building
- The need of digging up a pit is another difficulty in a transformation. Most civil engineers and building contractors are loath to dig a hole under an existing building.

Now, the costs of installing a lift and enabling senior citizens to remain independent and stay longer - let's say for a decade or two - in their flat or house must be balanced with the cost to society of transferring old-age citizens to institutions, often against their will. There, we reach the political level. Of course, today, most governments will refuse to even consider subsidizing, but beware, the sheer number of aged citizens in our society, will push their agenda in the foreground. Old-age citizens vote. New old-age organisations will appear, old-age magazines exist in all main languages. It

becomes a market of its own. Switzerland – which has an original form of direct democracy, with its system of “votation”, has had a referendum, a “popular initiative” as they call it, to decide for “Equal rights to the people with disabilities”. The vote took place very recently, on May 18th, 2003. The project implied subsidies for adapting buildings and making them accessible to the handicapped, meaning by extension many of the old-age citizens concerned.

The “Initiative” was rejected, but what is interesting is that it was only rejected by 62.3%. It means 37.7% of the Swiss voters were for it. Swiss studies made to prepare the referendum, had concluded that ten years was a correct amortization period, but of course each country situation is different. This is simply to say that the topic is going to appear and reappear, with a vengeance, until governments do something about it.

In a “small” country like Sweden - Sweden is large in size, but only has some 9 million inhabitants - there are 75 000 residential buildings of 3 levels and more without lifts, that could, that should be transformed. In the 80’s the Swedish government subsidized the installation of lifts, regardless of type, to a level of 30% of the cost. The project was discontinued a few years later. Again, it is an indication that governments hesitate in view of the immediate costs of subsidizing such works, but progress is being made. In European countries, the state subsidy can vary from 0 to 55% of the cost. There is a clear need for harmonization.

We believe that national governments should consider the introduction of subsidy systems or detaxation for these investments in private or public housing buildings. A VAT of 0% would already be a strong signal.

The European Commission should organize a thorough study of the comparative impact of keeping people at home or putting them in institutions, and include the job creation or job consolidation in the building industry, in lift installation and modernisation. These jobs can not be delocalised.

These are just some thoughts on a topic: the ageing European population, which will be with us in the coming decades, more and more so. We thought it was important to start looking at the issue, in the light of our action to improve accessibility to the people with disabilities and in the light of the

introduction of the new European standard: the SNEL norm (Safety Norm for Existing Lifts) that should be translated in all national European

legislation. Thanks to all our speakers today. The issue will not be solved in one day, that is why we need to prepare now.

Thank you for your attention.