Fostering awareness of what stops pedestrian environments being inclusive and accessible: resources and reflections from a multinational study

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The Inclusive Public Space (IPS) project aimed to deepen understanding of how designs of city streets and interactions with other road users often disadvantage disabled people—and many older pedestrians and those with young children besides. It also aimed to raise awareness of how this type of 'street exclusion' impacts the lives of the people concerned and the importance of tackling it. As well as a focus on law and policy, IPS addressed these aims by producing a range of films and awareness-raising guides.

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Methods

Working with collaborators in each project country (India, Kenya, the Netherlands, the USA and the UK) during COVID, we conducted interviews online and via phone. In each country, we interviewed lawyers, policymakers, planners, campaigners, and pedestrians experiencing barriers accessing streets in two selected cities. Pedestrian participants were also invited to share 'stories' about their experiences to be used as part of our films or other awareness-raising outputs. Findings from these interviews and stories informed our awareness-raising guides and films.

The films were based on footage (filmed by local videographers) of barriers highlighted by our pedestrian participants, many of whom chose to feature in those films themselves. We produced two types of films: short documentaries and virtual reality (VR) films.

We adopted a strongly reflexive, iterative approach, adjusting the guides and films on an ongoing basis. These were informed by comments made by pedestrian and stakeholder participants at 'feed-back and feed-forward' workshops held in each city, by people who viewed our films at various events and by ongoing discussion and reflection within the research and production team. Early films were produced in-house, within the IPS team, and a specialist supplier provided subtitling and audio descriptions. After staff changes, however, we worked with external suppliers to produce the films based on footage and scripts provided by the IPS team. The experience of one of these suppliers (Dave Lynch) in immersive story-telling greatly enriched and facilitated this reflexive process in the VR context—particularly important given the novelty of applying audio description to VR films and of using VR for purposes such as those of IPS.

Our methods and production processes were driven by care (beyond bare commitment) to maximise accessibility and inclusion. This built on our reflexive approach and required a considerable investment of time. It resulted in multiple versions of each film to suit different needs. Thus, all spoken text in films is subtitled (for people with hearing impairments), and all films are available with audio descriptions (for people with visual impairments). Several of the illustrative films embedded in this article are audio-described. Further, although budget limitations made it impossible to translate every film into the five project languages (English, Dutch, Swahili, Marathi and Hindi), all films are available in English and the relevant local language or languages. For example, all Netherlands films are in English and Dutch, and all India films are in English, Marathi and Hindi.

Short documentary films

These films are of three main types. Firstly, thematic country-based films. The vast majority are of this type. Each addresses a particular type of street exclusion identified during our thematic analysis of interview data and an analysis of the raw footage. Each film draws on footage featuring (or selected by) multiple pedestrian participants and is supported by a narrative script incorporating short quotes from interviews and stories.

Crossing the Road

https://vimeo.com/1034357014

Secondly, city-specific films. These relate only to Mombasa and Nairobi and emerged in response to suggestions from workshop participants, who explained that such films would be particularly helpful in ongoing advocacy efforts. The explanatory narrative in these films consists entirely of words spoken or signed by the pedestrian participants who feature in them.

Experiences of People with Disabilities in Mombasa
Short film — English dubbed | audio description

https://vimeo.com/1073961450

Thirdly, person-specific films. There is only one such film. It emerged because the pedestrian participant in question, who collaborated in the production of this film, chose to audio-record a 'story' about his experience of street exclusion, which mapped very closely onto the particular journey he had made while being filmed. It thus features a range of different types of barriers encountered on that journey.

My Journey

https://vimeo.com/1034356104

Virtual reality films

These were all based on footage of a single pedestrian participant making a journey—that journey being one they made on a routine basis, featuring particular types of barriers they wished to highlight. These films are divided, roughly equally, between those in which the footage is from a head camera worn by the participant (first-person perspective) and those in which it is from a head camera worn by the videographer or other person nominated by the participant following close behind them (third-person perspective). The head cameras used captured a 360° full visual panorama.

Our VR films can be viewed on traditional screens using the mouse to 'look' around or with VR headsets, where the viewer can look in every direction. They are also adapted for viewing in the University of Leeds Highly Immersive Kinematic Experimental Research (HIKER) pedestrian lab—a cave facility in which the viewer is seated in a room with film projected all around them.

Our VR films aim to provide viewers with an embodied experience of street exclusion, conveying something of the experience of the person making the journey. Viewing these films, particularly in VR headsets or HIKER, creates a powerful sensation of being in someone else's body. If we (as the viewer) look down, we see the lower body of the participant, and our eyeline is that of the participant. We encounter barriers with close proximity and hear the personal interactions between working guide dogs and their owners.

Lyn's Routine Journey
Audio description | subtitles

https://vimeo.com/1033839338
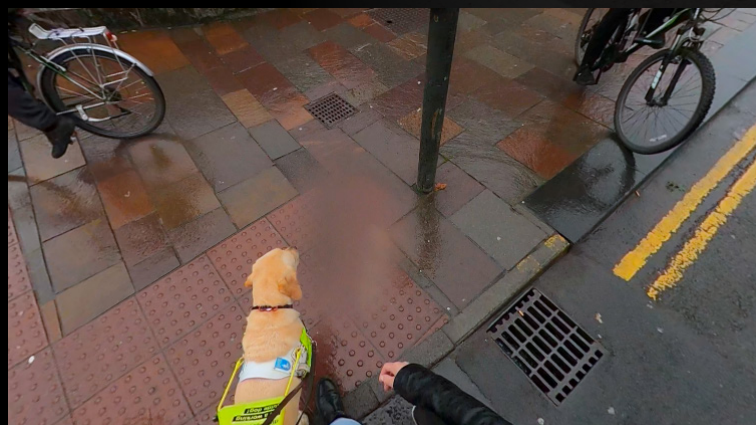
While almost all the participants featured in these films were disabled, one film features a non-disabled mother navigating streets with her baby in a pram and a young daughter on a scooter.

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Maja's Routine Journey
Audio description

https://vimeo.com/1032108230

Our early VR films featured no speaking or text introducing the participant. However, we revised this approach for later films in light of workshop feedback and suggestions from other viewers (including participants in an impact-oriented study of our early VR footage, attendees at various IPS events and the 2024 Walk21 Conference). Later films, therefore, include a short context-setting section familiarising viewers with the participants' experience and surroundings. Some feature the participants' voices describing their experience and end with the changes they want to see. All of these additions help to enrich the embodied nature of the experience of street exclusion.

Jayant's Routine Journey
English | audio description

https://vimeo.com/1032890113

Awareness-raising guides

The films aim to highlight the nature and impact of street exclusion. Tackling it involves actions of various types. Each of us can take steps to ensure that our interactions with pedestrians and street environments are such as to minimise exclusion and, beyond this, that we have a positive impact on the experiences of disabled people and others disadvantaged by similar types of barriers. Indeed, law and policy often foster this type of inclusion-enhancing behaviour. To highlight what it is that we can all do, the IPS project has produced a Citizen Action guide, which also addresses means by which we can escalate the need to address this type of issue through political and reporting processes.

The second type of awareness-raising guide produced by the IPS project relates to the use of law and policy. This sets out pointers for individuals wanting to explore the possibility of using the law to challenge particular problems which have caused them harm (physical or economic). Pointers are also provided to the extensive law and policy reports on each project country, where more critical reflection about relevant law and policy is set out.

To view all the films from the IPS project, https://inclusivepublicspace.leeds.ac.uk/videos/.