

Beyond the Standard: Toward the Spatial and Social Inclusion of Persons with Reduced Mobility in Shopping Centers in Cameroon

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Abstract: In Cameroonian urban centers, public and commercial infrastructure often reinforces social exclusion by treating accessibility for persons with reduced mobility (PRM) as a secondary consideration rather than as a fundamental design condition. This article presents a conceptual framework for moving from a “corrective” design approach focused on compliance after the fact toward an inclusive architectural paradigm integrated from the outset and adapted to shopping centers in Cameroon. Drawing on the principles of universal design, the sociology of space, and legal provisions relating to human rights, the article proposes three operational directions: integrating circulation as a continuous functional spine through networks of ramps with rest landings and structures on pilotis; creating democratic points of convergence through central mezzanine arrangements that incorporate elements supporting spatial well-being (water features and elevated views); and deploying inclusive architecture as a catalyst for national development and social cohesion (living together). The article demonstrates that spatial accessibility adapted to local needs can be achieved without creating an excessive financial burden, thereby establishing an operational reference for sustainable urban development in resource-constrained contexts.

Keywords: *Inclusive Architecture; Universal Design; Shopping Center; Spatial Circulation; Urban Porosity; Accessibility; Cameroon.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Entering, moving through, and strolling around a shopping center may seem self-evident for most users. Yet behind this apparent fluidity lies a fundamental spatial imbalance: the persistent exclusion of persons with reduced mobility (PRM). As prominent urban spaces and major nodes of sociability in Cameroon, shopping centers should serve as models of accessibility and social inclusion.

This observation calls for a fundamental paradigm shift in local architectural practice: how can we move from corrective architecture applied after the fact to inclusive design in which accessibility becomes, from the sketch stage onward, the driver of spatial fluidity?

To address this question, the article is organized around the methodological axes of the ENSTP academic framework:

- Section II establishes the conceptual framework for inclusive architecture and universal design applied to commercial spaces.
- Section III analyzes physical and sensory accessibility devices (ramps with landings, structures on pilotis, and vertical continuity).
- Section IV develops the social dimension, spatial visibility through the central mezzanine island, and the impact on living together in Cameroon.
- Section V discusses the gap between standards and built reality, as well as the economic feasibility of the project in the Cameroonian context.
- Section VI concludes with operational perspectives.

II. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INCLUSIVE ARCHITECTURE AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

➤ Foundations and Paradigm Shift

Inclusive architecture goes beyond mere technical compliance with regulations. It stands in opposition to so-called “corrective” or palliative architecture, which consists of adding accessibility devices after the fact (isolated secondary ramps, service entrances) in ways that stigmatize users. Universal design requires space to be conceived for the full range of human abilities from the very first design gesture, ensuring that what is essential for 10% of the population becomes comfortable for 100%.

➤ Application to Commercial and Retail Space

Within shopping centers, universal design requires the removal of all barriers, both physical and psychological, that fragment the use of space. The objective is to avoid segregated routes and provide a continuous, shared spatial experience for all users.

III. ACCESSIBILITY IN COMMERCIAL AND URBAN SPACE

➤ Circulation as the Spatial Backbone

In any architectural project, and particularly in shopping centers, circulation is a focal issue. It acts as a true backbone: without deep consideration of movement, the user journey loses its meaning and purpose. For genuine inclusion, circulation must be treated universally, without segmentation by user category.

➤ Physical and Spatial Accessibility Devices

➤ The Ramp and Rest Landing: Effortless Ascent

The access ramp becomes a practical and democratic solution when, with a carefully controlled slope, it gives both able-bodied visitors and persons with reduced mobility the experience of a fluid, almost effortless ascent.

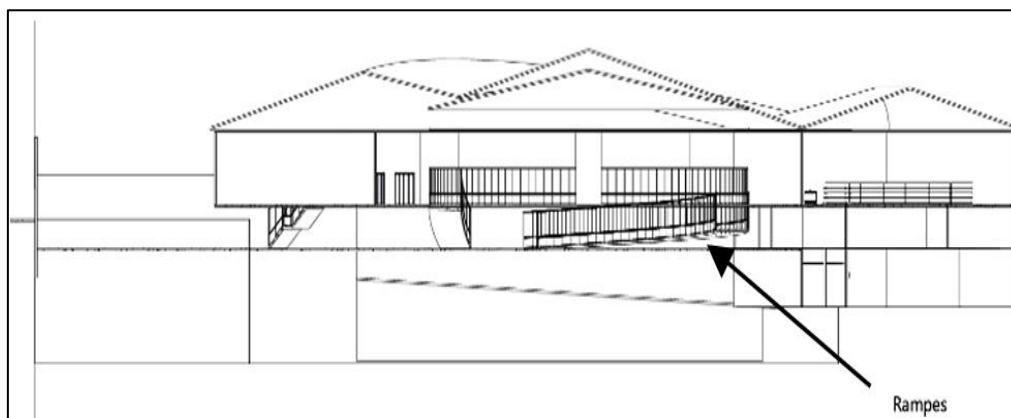


Fig 1 Section View of the Access Ramp

The innovation lies in the systematic integration of rest landings. Beyond their primary function of physical recovery, these landings transform the ascent into a contemplative

experience: they become belvederes offering broad views of the building and its urban surroundings. The ramp is no longer merely a connection device, but a living space in its own right.

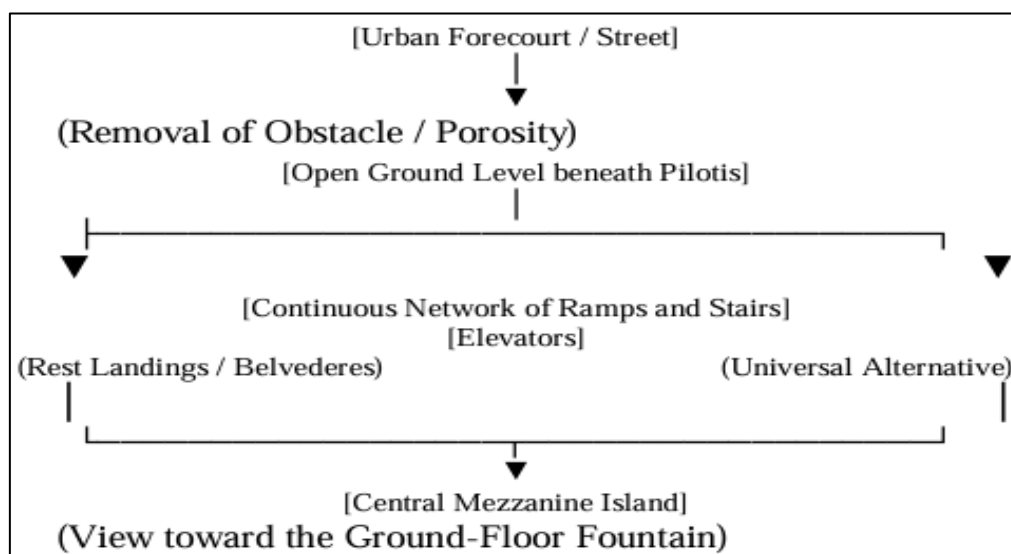


Fig 2 Continuous and Unified Movement Chain from the City to the Central Island.

➤ *Structure on Pilotis and Vertical Alternative*

With the structure raised on pilotis, the building lifts lightly above the ground, freeing the site to create a continuous public space. Rather than becoming an obstacle, this elevation becomes an invitation: the structure appears to open toward the city, naturally guiding every visitor to the access ramps without rupture or distinction.

In this configuration, the elevator does not correct a design defect; it acts as a complementary alternative to the ramp. Both are accessible to everyone and lead to the same prominent destination: the central mezzanine island. This convergence of routes toward a single point symbolizes the outcome of a design in which accessibility becomes the engine of social encounter.

IV. SPATIAL VISIBILITY, DIGNITY AND SOCIETAL IMPACT

➤ *Inclusion Through Visibility: From Commercial Space to Civic Space*

The second axis of this architectural transformation lies in the diversity of bodies within the same space. Too often, shopping centers are designed for able-bodied people, relegating others to the margins of visibility. By placing accessibility at the heart of the project, this segmentation is broken down to create genuine spatial diversity.

- *A Democratic Convergence: The Central Island*

The central island, designed as a prominent mezzanine, becomes the meeting point where persons with reduced mobility and able-bodied users converge. By arriving at the same place, at the same time, and through the same routes (ramps, stairs, or universally accessible elevators), architecture materializes the right to non-discrimination. In accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, dignity is an inalienable right; the built environment acts directly on users' self-esteem by offering a sense of belonging and fulfillment.

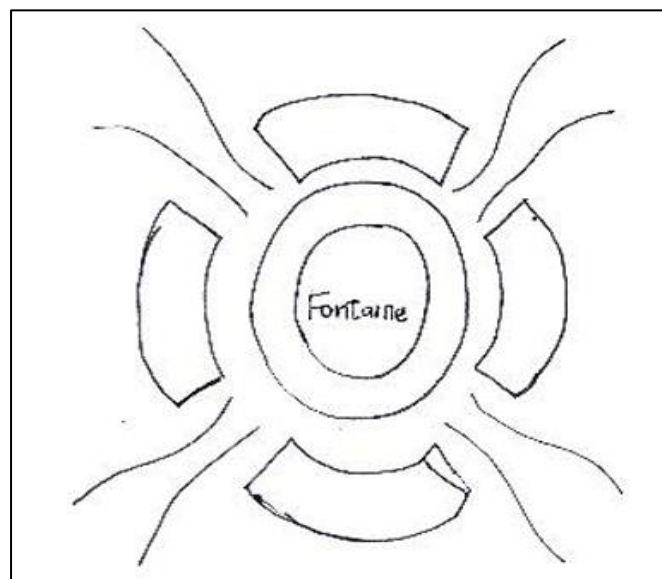


Fig 3 Sketch Showing the Central Island Around a Fountain

- *Overcoming the Psychological Barrier through Well-Being*

The central island goes beyond its commercial function to become a place of fraternal exchange and everyday life. The mezzanine, open onto the central void, provides a calming view of the fountain located on the ground floor. This visual and acoustic connection contributes to a sense of universal well-being.

Above all, this configuration helps overcome a major psychological barrier: the belief that access to height must be an exhausting physical struggle. By reaching the island with minimal energy expenditure thanks to the fluidity of the ramps, the person with reduced mobility realizes that elevation is no longer a privilege, but a space for everyone.

➤ *Architecture as a Vector of Cohesion for the Cameroonian City*

Architecture is never neutral; it reflects our collective ambitions. In this project, the shopping center goes beyond its commercial role to embrace a broader mission: revealing and supporting human sociability.

- *From Diversity to Interaction*

The true essence of sociability does not lie in remaining among similar people, but in a place's capacity to foster interaction with "the other" despite differences of every kind. By creating a space where the movement of a person with reduced mobility and that of an able-bodied person naturally intertwine, the shopping center becomes a laboratory for living together. It does more than comply with standards: it strengthens social ties and restores a form of spatial fraternity that is essential to the Cameroonian social fabric.

- *A Sign of Development and Emergence*

The city expresses itself through its structures. This shopping center becomes a strong signal: that of a Cameroon in transformation, moving from the status of a developing country toward a nation that innovates through inclusion. By integrating universal accessibility from the outset, we demonstrate that development is measured not only by the height of buildings, but also by their capacity to leave no one behind on the forecourt. It is the affirmation of a modernity that places the human being—in all human diversity—at the center of its priorities.

V. DISCUSSION

Despite the Cameroonian legal framework, notably Law No. 2010/002 on the protection of persons with disabilities, the built reality reveals a gap between normative intentions and implementation on the ground. Most commercial spaces suffer from breaks in the accessibility chain.

The analysis nevertheless demonstrates that architectural inclusion does not require complex or expensive technologies. The judicious use of structures on pilotis to free the ground plane, the integration of ramps with regulatory slopes as major architectural elements, and the staging of contemplative rest landings are cost-controlled solutions. When integrated from the sketch stage, these interventions avoid the additional costs

associated with later adaptations and increase the overall value of the commercial development.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has established a conceptual model for inherently inclusive commercial architecture in Cameroon:

- Universal circulation (ramps with landings and pilotis) ensures continuity of movement and frees the urban ground plane.
- Spatial visibility (central mezzanine island and fountain) transforms commercial space into a civic place that generates dignity and well-being.
- Urban impact turns the building into a strong signal of Cameroonian modernity and social cohesion.

This approach proposes an operational framework that can be transferred to the design of future public and commercial facilities in the national context.

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