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Rethinking Accessibility as a Cultural Generative Ecosystem

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Abstract

The paper presents a theoretical reflection on accessibility, developed through dialogue between an architect and a philosopher. It explores the cultural horizon of a transdisciplinary discipline whose conceptual boundaries remain fluid and examines the role accessibility can play in creating a freer and more inclusive society. At the core of the paper lies the concept of accessibility as a *Cultural Generative Ecosystem*, a dynamic and evolving construct through which accessibility operates as a transformative force. This ecosystem is embedded within a conceptual framework structured around specific Fields of Inquiry (Relational, Spatial, Institutional) and Domains (Person, Society, Environment). In this perspective, accessibility is presented as a complex process rooted in humanistic values and grounded in care ethics, phenomenological experience, and human rights. The paper highlights the potential of accessibility to counter diversity-related discrimination, promote empowerment, and guide the transformation of human habitats in line with people's needs and expectations. At the same time, it acknowledges the objective and cultural challenges involved in cultivating an accessibility-oriented mindset. Following a comprehensive theoretical and methodological groundwork that lays the foundation for a broader conceptual reframing of accessibility, the paper identifies six conceptual determinants that define its complexity in the built environment, particularly in relation to disability and the relational nature of public space. These determinants—polysemous, contextual, multi-scalar and relational, corporeal and spatial-temporal, multi-criteria, and multi-component—are examined in relation to the four interwoven dimensions that structure the Cultural Generative Ecosystem of accessibility: technical, social, organizational, and generative. Together, they offer a framework for rethinking inclusive design as a situated, relational, and ethically grounded practice.

Keywords: accessibility; inclusive design; disability; urban space; care ethics; spatial justice; human-centered planning; accessibility determinants

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1. Introduction

Purpose and Structure of the Paper

Accessibility is commonly understood as a technical and regulatory discipline that aims to remove architectural barriers hindering access to resources for people with disabilities. Although this narrow approach is necessary, it risks overlooking the cultural, ethical, and spatial dimensions of inclusion. This paper therefore proposes a broader conceptualization, positioning accessibility as a cross-disciplinary body of knowledge primarily oriented toward realizing human rights and mitigating discrimination arising from the diverse expressions of the human condition. In this perspective, accessibility is not merely a matter of compliance, but a strategic and ethical tool for shaping inclusive environments,

particularly in urban contexts, where spatial, social, and cultural barriers often intersect, and where planning, design, and policymaking play a pivotal role in promoting equity and spatial justice [1–3].

Beyond its regulatory framing, accessibility also draws on deeper philosophical and moral foundations. In fact, it is preceded in contemporary times by a philosophical thought intertwining a concrete anthropological vision with a phenomenological view of the world. This philosophical foundation is also preceded by a moral sensitivity that considers access to the world as a condition for the realization of the principle of justice in the sense of fair opportunities [4].

Such ethical orientation is grounded in a philosophy of care, which regards accessibility not only as a right but as a relational practice of attentiveness to human vulnerability. In this sense, human rights and human care are not peripheral references but foundational principles that broaden the horizon of accessibility and enable it to be rethought as a transformative cultural and spatial phenomenon.

From a phenomenological point of view, Edmund Husserl noted that the perception of physical things is the original act through which we experience in the space-time interconnection. Incomplete accessibility to the physical world breaks the causal uniformity of the space-time dimension and alters or prevents the synthesis of a more complete theoretical understanding of the lifeworld. An experience of the lifeworld in which the body limits our perception of the world and does not allow us to create a real relationship with it is harmful to the person [5].

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thinking also follows along this line, considering the lived body ("le corps propre") not as a simple lookout contemplating the world, but as the necessary tool for experiencing and knowing it in depth. It was such interpretation which led the French philosopher to assert that the body is in-the-world as a body–space system in which the body schema integrates with the external world according to the organism's plans [6].

Our existence in the world consists of situations in which the body measures itself against its tasks; therefore, the prosthetic nature of technology and various scientific disciplines strives to create the best conditions for more perfect accessibility. This interdisciplinary effort is not merely instrumental but reflects a deeper epistemological shift: accessibility emerges as a field that requires the integration of multiple forms of knowledge.

While previous reflections have often privileged technical and regulatory approaches, this paper adopts a broader and more integrated perspective, seeking to construct a dynamic framework capable of addressing the multifaceted nature of accessibility.

Such a perspective is shaped by a deeper anthropological understanding and a phenomenological sensitivity toward understanding humankind in the concrete world of life, in lived space. This mosaic is enriched by the substantive contribution of a broad range of disciplinary fields, including the social sciences, design theory, legal and ethical studies, disability studies, and environmental psychology, among others.

To articulate this perspective, the paper is structured into two main parts.

The first (Conceptual Background) explores the purpose and mission of accessibility, emphasizing its social role and humanistic foundations. It develops a cultural and philosophical background that reframes accessibility as a condition of justice, rooted in care ethics, phenomenological experience, and the relational nature of human existence. This foundation supports a broader epistemological shift, positioning accessibility as a lens through which to interpret the human condition in space and time.

The second part (Discussion) introduces the notion of accessibility as a *Cultural Generative Ecosystem*, a dynamic and evolving framework of values, practices, and relationships through which accessibility operates as a transformative force. It is not merely a condition to be guaranteed but a source of social and cultural innovation. As such, accessibility becomes

a process involving multiple actors, evolving and adapting over time, and generating new practices, languages, and tools that improve participation and inclusion. This part also identifies the key elements that shape environmental accessibility as a distinct and evolving field of study. It introduces and briefly describes six interrelated conceptual determinants, each examined in relation to the four dimensions—technical, social, organizational, and generative—that structure the Cultural Generative Ecosystem of accessibility. This framing highlights the theoretical and operational complexity of the subject and supports a more integrated and context-sensitive approach to inclusive design.

This paper does not present empirical findings, but instead offers a theoretical synthesis intended to inform future research, guide planning practices, and inspire inclusive design strategies.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Framing Accessibility: Disciplinary Lenses and Conceptual Anchors

The conceptualization of accessibility adopted in this paper is intentionally multidimensional and transdisciplinary. Rather than treating accessibility as a merely technical or regulatory issue, the Authors approach it as an evolving field of meanings, practices, and normative orientations that intersect with diverse disciplinary perspectives (see Section 3.1). This section, in particular, draws upon contributions from philosophy, social and political theory, urban studies, and care ethics to articulate a framework through which accessibility can be critically examined and reimagined.

Two foundational lenses guide this inquiry: human care and human rights. The former foregrounds relationality, vulnerability, and the situated ethics of support and interdependence, that is, ethics rooted in concrete contexts, shaped by material conditions and the dynamics of everyday life [7]. The latter emphasizes normative commitments to dignity, freedom, and social justice, drawing on the capabilities approach and critical theories of recognition and redistribution [8–10]. Together, these lenses allow to explore accessibility not only as a pre-condition to be achieved, but as a generative principle capable of reshaping institutional arrangements, spatial configurations, and cultural imaginaries (see Section 3.2).

The following subsections develop this framework by first clarifying the conceptual contours of accessibility (Section 2.2), then examining its articulation as a form of human care embedded in three interrelated fields of inquiry: (1) relational, (2) spatial, and (3) institutional (Section 2.3), and finally as a tool for pursuing human rights (Section 2.4), with specific attention to freedom, social inclusion, and equal opportunities.

To support this framing, the next subsection introduces the concept of accessibility, outlining its semantic nuances, disciplinary uses, and everyday relevance.

2.2. Introducing Accessibility

Accessibility means the condition or characteristic of a thing, person or concept of being *accessible* [11]. The adjective "accessible" derives from the Late Latin term *accessibĭlis* which means "affording access, capable of being approached or reached" [12]. It usually highlights positive and socially acceptable characteristics, although it is sometimes open to interpretative duplicity (e.g., "accessible person", "accessible territory", etc.). However, in certain contexts the concept of accessibility may take on ambiguous or even negative connotations when referring to things that should not be easily accessible (e.g., drugs, firearms, pornography, alcohol, etc.).

Rather than having a single, fixed meaning, accessibility functions as a multifaceted prism that reflects diverse priorities, sensitivities, and disciplinary perspectives. In environmental studies, for instance, a geographer might define accessibility as the ease with

which a location or service can be reached [13]; a transportation planner as proximity, measured by travel time, to primary activity nodes such as the CBD, retail centers, and educational institutions [14], whereas an urban economist may interpret it as a strategic factor in business location decisions, considering proximity to markets, infrastructure, and labor resources [15].

Accessibility influences all human activities, the use of material goods and the intangible aspects of life, such as communicating with others or participating in social life; it also has a myriad of variations: accessibility to information, social accessibility, cultural accessibility, digital accessibility, economic accessibility, accessibility to health, accessibility to education, accessibility to common assets, geographic accessibility, environmental accessibility, etc. Each variation reflects specific relational dynamics between individuals and their environments, particularly within urban contexts where spatial configurations shape everyday experiences.

From a broader perspective, accessibility emerges as a foundational value in the life of every human being. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone comes up against access problems and experiences the subtle discomforts or great suffering of feeling excluded while shaping their life's project. Therefore, when targeted support strategies are not required, accessibility should not give rise to special policies or interventions. Instead, it should inform ordinary decision-making processes concerning human relations, knowledge systems, and the transformation of anthropic space [16]. In other words, accessibility should not be an afterthought, a goal pursued through additions, adjustments, and compromises after general decisions have already been made. Instead, it must be embedded in those decisions right from the outset [17].

This need arises at all levels: from the creation of the laws and institutions underpinning society to rules and regulations in the fields of employment, education, health, tourism, construction, etc. The design process provides an apt metaphor: accessibility is often considered too late, as a regulatory requirement only, once the fundamental design choices have been finalized. Consequently, accessibility measures are often added to projects in a way that is disconnected from the original design intent. This disconnection occurs both functionally and semantically. Such an approach risks perpetuating exclusion by treating accessibility as a corrective measure rather than a generative principle of social justice and inclusive design.

2.3. Accessibility as a Form of Human Care

The concept of accessibility, as we know it today, was established along with modernity when, in the early 17th century, there was a shift from the physics of qualities to the physics that would pave the way for the use of mathematics in the quantification of the physical world. As a result of this shift, science abandoned the obscure language of magic and took the language of mathematics as its *metron*, enabling the transmission of knowledge. This knowledge becomes accessible through its ability to measure, explain, and reproduce physical phenomena. The inaccessible and essentially secret knowledge of the magician or alchemist thereby gives way to a new attitude. From Galilean physics onward, science has conceived adequate systems to comprehend nature and has embraced the clarity of ideas as an ideal of knowledge. It is the method of mathematics which can make the world accessible, because it guarantees full control of the registers of communication and allows us to verify every phase of progress of scientific knowledge.

Thanks to this epistemological shift, modernity has placed human beings at the center of the world. However, it has not succeeded in making the built space an ideal enlivened by the human dimension and experience, nor in replacing the tension toward spatial separation with the tension toward social inclusion. Leonardo's *Vitruvian Man* is the

symbol of classical perfection, the expression of man's perfect nature in harmony with the Earth and the Universe. This ideal man—a metaphor for the "standard man" (an average healthy adult) with respect to whom the great process of the anthropization of the world has taken place and is taking place—does not reflect the multiform expressions of the person marked by a plurality of individual, social and environmental specificities. Nor does he embody a relational world that unfolds through the discipline of freedom.

It can be said that environmental accessibility is the continuation, through the means of architecture, of the philosophical effort of promoting a *personalist* worldview, the philosophical vision founded on *liberation*, by means—in the words of Mounier [18] (p. 61)—the "personalization of myself and of my world". Accessibility is not a freedom offered to humankind, it is a conquest of the spirit of freedom, which is "indefatigable in tracing and regaining lost liberties, i.e., in dealing with situations in which one is delivered up like an object to the play of impersonal forces." [18] (p. 62). Any anthropic interference on the world must be conceived and carried out bearing in mind two exigencies: building revolves around human being and what is built must not compromise nature irremediably. In other words, *ars aedificandi* embodies anthropologic values which make the architect promote freedom.

From this philosophical standpoint, accessibility is a form of care for others. By preparing the world to welcome everyone, it contributes to overcoming an individualistic view of the world. In urban environments, this principle translates into inclusive design practices that proactively embrace human diversity and foster belonging, shaping spaces that reflect the pluralism of lived experience. Accessibility corresponds to the universal instinct of sociability and shares with nature the drive to overcome everything that stands in the way of it achieving its design. It is, first and foremost, an expression of the recognition of difference and tension toward inclusion. [19] (pp. 41–62).

This relational nature of accessibility resonates with the ethics of care, which foregrounds attentiveness, responsiveness, and the capacity to act in ways that sustain others. In this sense, accessibility is not only a spatial or architectural concern, but also a normative orientation that affirms the dignity and uniqueness of each person. This perspective invites us to consider accessibility as embedded in three interrelated fields of inquiry: (1) relational care and everyday accessibility, (2) spatial ethics and the design of support, and (3) institutional care as a politics of inclusion.

Table 1 summarizes these three fields of inquiry, highlighting their respective functions and disciplinary foundations within the broader framework of accessibility as a form of human care.

Table 1. Fields of inquiry, associated functions, and key disciplinary anchors underpinning the conceptual framework of accessibility as a form of human care.

Fields of Inquiry	Functions	Key Disciplinary Anchors
Relational	Recognition, care, personalization	Personalist philosophy, ethics of care
Spatial	Environmental adaptation, inclusive design	Urban planning, architecture, ergonomics
Institutional	Rights, agency, redistribution	Law, public policy, disability and social studies

The background to accessibility is the philosophical conception of the self as such, from the Delphic exhortation "know yourself" (γνῶθι σεαυτόν) up to the personalist philosophy of the 20th century. It is the first reality we are invited to make accessible to ourselves. We are not simply thrown into the world; we are carefully welcomed into it. From birth, the world is made accessible to us. There is a maieutic dimension to those

who prepare and arrange the built space for each of us, making our inner self and what surrounds it accessible.

As Puig de la Bellacasa [7] argues, care is not only a moral disposition but also a material and speculative practice embedded in socio-technical arrangements.

This anthropological lens invites us to view accessibility not as a fixed standard, but as an open system that evolves with human complexity. As Edgar Morin points out [20] (p. 233)—"Il est tonique enfin de considérer le monde, la vie, l'homme, la connaissance, l'action comme systèmes ouverts". Even in the field of accessibility it is important to recognize the "vérités polyphoniques de la complexité" [*ivi*]. This recognition paves the way for a new culture that respects boundaries while seeking to overcome anything that prevents or hinders human fulfilment. Accessibility can be achieved not only through the transformation of the habitat, but also through the transformation of human beings. Eliminating obstacles does not flatten reality; it simply enables us to navigate it at the different speeds at which we all move along life's journey. This dynamic and adaptive approach reflects the essence of a cultural generative ecosystem, where accessibility becomes a living process of care, transformation, and co-creation.

2.4. Accessibility as a Tool for Pursuing Human Rights

Accessibility is increasingly recognized as the set of enabling conditions that allow individuals—particularly those facing discrimination based on factors such as age, gender, sexual orientation, disability, health status, cultural background, religious beliefs, or economic circumstances—to fully exercise their citizenship rights and pursue their aspirations. This evolving understanding reflects a shift from static definitions to a more dynamic and systemic perspective. In this view, accessibility is shaped by the interaction of diverse actors, disciplines, and environments. In urban contexts, such conditions manifest through spatial, infrastructural, social, and institutional arrangements that facilitate access to resources.

This normative orientation complements the philosophical and anthropological dimensions discussed earlier, reinforcing the idea that accessibility is not only a technical or legal concern, but also a cultural and ethical commitment to human dignity.

The following is a brief overview of three fundamental human rights: freedom, social inclusion, and equal opportunities in relation to accessibility. These rights not only benefit from accessibility, but also serve as essential preconditions for the realization of other rights, such as education, participation, and health.

2.4.1. Accessibility and Freedom

According to Wurman [21] (p. 45), "Access means the liberty to take advantage of resources". As it is necessary to know the qualities of a 'resource'—that is, an available medium that supports the fulfilment of human needs, tangible and intangible—in order to purposely use it, Wurman's definition could be supplemented as follows: "Accessibility means the ability to understand the meaning and functioning of a resource and the freedom to use it" [22].

The desire for freedom is not abstract but is always related to a specific circumstance. Sartre wrote [23] (p. 489), "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom". Moreover, it is not possible for anyone to achieve an absolute freedom that makes everything accessible. More realistically—as the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier [24] asserted—we can aspire to a "liberté sous conditions". This form of freedom is affirmed by experiencing it with others and for others.

In the world, an element reveals itself as an 'obstacle' only when it stands in the way of the achievement of a goal, of meeting a need, only when it limits freedom of choice or makes it difficult or impossible to enjoy a resource. Only then does this otherwise

generic and neutral element become an obstacle. A language I do not speak—Mandarin, for instance—poses no problem until I need to use it for a job interview, to read a document, or to visit China. A mountain is just part of the landscape unless I attempt to climb it without the necessary equipment, skills, or experience. Likewise, a train becomes an obstacle to my work or holiday only when I am unable to use it.

Accessibility is both a personal and collective endeavor to remove obstacles (physical, cultural, economic, social, technological, etc.) that limit people's freedom of choice. It is (or should be) the result of the commitment of a multitude of actors (intergovernmental agencies, state organizations, local authorities, social institutions, community facilities, informal networks) to make resources available to as many people as possible. In the difficult and never-ending process of negotiating our bodies' relationships with the environment, the task of accessibility is to intervene in the environment in order to foster processes of bodily adaptation and mitigate person-environment conflicts.

This echoes the idea of care as a situated and relational practice: freedom is not achieved in isolation, but through the collective effort to make environments responsive to human diversity.

A resource made available is conceptually assimilated and gradually becomes something that is no longer detached and polarized. From being a hieratic and precluded entity, it becomes a familiar entity that can become an opportunity to promote the human potential that could not otherwise be expressed and raise the social capital of a community.

When it enables the expression of personal freedom that has been denied or coerced, accessibility expands social opportunities, knowledge and human creativity. It becomes both an enabling tool for people and a collective asset [8]. For example, the most accessible environments encourage more people to actively participate in public life, overcome loneliness and mitigate stress [25]. They also enable individuals to contribute to the growth of society and to our understanding of the world [26,27]. In this way, people themselves become the 'resources' for processing and transferring values and knowledge.

2.4.2. Accessibility and Social Inclusion

Difficulty in accessing resources, combined with "inadequate social participation, lack of social integration and lack of power" [28] (p. 105), represents a key driver of *social exclusion*. Levitas et al. [29] (p. 21) define social exclusion as "a complex and multidimensional process [that] involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in normal relationships and activities available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole." Social exclusion lies at the root of poverty [30–32] and represents a dominant framework for analyzing social inequality [33], democratic sustainability, and the resilience of contemporary societies. This is particularly evident in relation to emerging global challenges such as climate change, population ageing, migration, and technological advancement [34].

Accessibility is a powerful tool for social inclusion [16], a founding principle of *civitas*. Like inclusion, accessibility is not a legally sanctioned fact of life, a 'product', but rather a 'process in evolution', that is, it expresses tension toward an objective, rather than the objective itself. This process usually presupposes an initial conflict between different people and interests and moves toward policies and actions aimed at promoting people's autonomy and self-determination, expanding knowledge as well as employment and social opportunities. In urban policy, it translates into adaptive strategies that reconcile competing interests, redistribute spatial resources and promote inclusive governance frameworks. The interpretation of accessibility as a process is evocatively confirmed in the etymology of the verb "to access" (from the Latin *ad* + *ceděre*) which means "to go toward" [35].

2.4.3. Accessibility and Equal Opportunities

Inclusion is not just a response to the challenges posed to human interaction by various contexts, such as environmental, technological and cultural ones, but rather the patient search for connections between individual experiences and the broader horizon [36]. In the same way, accessibility is not a technical solution to diversity—which belong to nature and are a defining characteristic of humanity [37,38]—but it is an efficient tool to combat diversity-related discrimination. Accessibility aspires to make a relational life possible between inequalities and injustices; it is the justified hope that diversity will not consolidate into blind opposition but will model a culture of inclusion where people always come first.

Within the sphere of diversity-related discrimination, disability-related discrimination is one of the most difficult to address as—according to the Italian jurist Beniamino Deidda [39] (p. 12)—it "goes beyond the dimension of ideology or the regulatory framework and is rooted in the material dimension". "(. . .) daily life—he wrote—"is not hindered or prevented just because you are black or a woman. You can move about, eat alone, organise protests or go to the cinema. (. . .) If most people could agree that black people have the same rights as white people, the problem would be solved. If one day we agreed that women should have the same starting positions as men and there would be no differences in salary or career, the problem of gender discrimination would be solved. But this is not the case for the disabled. (. . .)" [translation by the Authors].

To overcome disability-related discrimination, unfortunately good laws are not enough, starting with those to enter the labour market [40,41], nor is it enough to overcome the stereotypes (behaviours, languages, practices, etc.) that create cultural marginalisation [42,43]. Problems rooted in the 'material dimension' of life, in body–space–time relationships and preventing access to resources need to be addressed [44,45]. And this is far from easy, given the distinct needs of each person with a disability, the adaptive challenges they encounter across diverse environments, and the boundless variability of human habitats. This challenge is particularly acute in public spaces, where spatial barriers and infrastructural limitations often intersect with social and cultural exclusion.

Beyond the rhetoric and slogans that often accompanies discussions on inclusion and slogans ("cities for all", "mobility for all", "tourism for all", "museums for all", etc.), unfortunately it is highly unlikely that one day there will be a world entirely free of architectural barriers [25,46,47], while it is easy to suppose that "many arenas or resources will never be fully accessible for all without escorts or personal assistants to accompany people with various impairments" [48] (p. 281).

As the presence of architectural barriers will unfortunately continue to hinder the social inclusion of people with disabilities, it remains essential to implement strategies and policies that support and empower them in developing environmental adaptation skills. In short, it is about strengthening agency, the capacity of people with disabilities to take an active role in shaping their own identity and destiny [8,49]. In this regard, empowering individuals through training and spatial awareness plays a crucial role. This is not only a matter of personal autonomy, but a cornerstone of inclusive urban development. For instance, Orientation and Mobility (O&M) courses can significantly enhance blind individuals' spatial awareness and personal autonomy by developing key competencies such as cane techniques, environmental sign recognition, spatial conceptualisation, and geographic orientation skills [50].

To conclude this section, Figure 1 offers a visual synthesis of the conceptual framework of accessibility, bridging the philosophical and normative dimensions explored above and laying the groundwork for the Cultural Generative Ecosystem introduced in the following section.

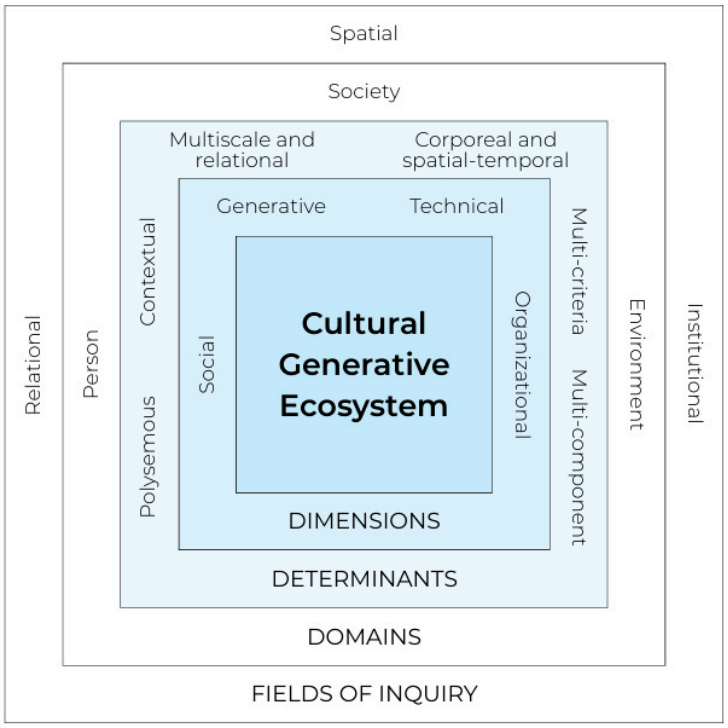


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of accessibility (Source: Authors).

3. Discussion

Building on the epistemological and philosophical foundations outlined in Section 2, this section develops a multidimensional and interpretative framework for accessibility. Rather than being confined to a technical-regulatory perimeter, accessibility is understood as a situated and evolving construct shaped by diverse ethical commitments, disciplinary lenses, and contextual conditions.

To articulate this perspective, the section unfolds in three interconnected subsections. First, Section 3.1 explores the domains in which accessibility emerges: the person, society, and the environment. These domains highlight the reciprocal influences between individuals and their living contexts, and underscore the need for inclusive and context-sensitive approaches.

Second, Section 3.2 introduces the concept of a Cultural Generative Ecosystem, a dynamic and relational system structured around four interdependent dimensions—technical, social, organizational, and generative—, which together define the systemic nature of accessibility.

Third, Section 3.3 identifies six conceptual determinants that further articulate the complexity of accessibility, emphasizing its polysemic, contextual, multi-scalar, corporeal, multi-criteria, and multi-component nature.

This conceptual progression connects the theoretical premises of Section 2 with the interpretative structure developed in the following subsections. Particular attention is given to urban contexts, where accessibility intersects with spatial justice, inclusion policies, and the lived experience of diverse user groups. The section invites a rethinking of accessibility as a generative and transformative principle, one that informs the design of environments capable of supporting human rights and flourishing.

3.1. Accessibility Domains

Accessibility as a goal is a relational phenomenon that goes beyond the domain of built environment. It seeks to attain a more suitable community dimension that welcomes

and belongs to people who relate to each other beyond the dialectic of opposites. The accessible space is the privileged place of mutual recognition where in a construction site of relations enlivened by thought-in-action [51], people grow, at different paces, interacting with each other, with the environment and with things.

Ortega y Gasset's famous expression "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" ["I am I and my circumstance"] [52] (p. 45), effectively highlights the reciprocal influences, the inextricable web of relationships between a person and their living environment. If it is true, as Ortega y Gasset claimed, that an individual's personality is not a reality in itself, but exists only in relation to the world that surrounds it and the things and relationships it is made up of, then an unsuitable living environment not only hinders or prevents activities from being carried out, but also influences the formation of a person's authentic self, the formation of their personality.

Accessibility arises, therefore, at the confluence of three domains: (1) the person, (2) society, and (3) the environment. It depends on multiple characteristics and the quality of their interactions [53].

Personal characteristics may include: the level of education, health conditions, disability, functional limitations (permanent or temporary), types of person-environment interfaces used, family structure, availability of economic resources, and innate abilities. According to scholars of Intersectionality, access to resources worsens when multiple social identities and the related discriminations are combined in one person. For example being disabled and poor; being a woman and of color [16,54–56].

Social characteristics pertain to the institutional, political, cultural and economic context. Among these, the following play an important role: a welcoming attitude, tolerance toward others, the social representation of diversity, the competence of the social actors in matters of inclusion, and the availability of social networks and services.

As far as environmental characteristics are concerned, the following can be mentioned: the transport and public services system and the territorial features, urban settlements, the public space and buildings that form the backdrop for human activities.

3.2. Accessibility as a Cultural Generative Ecosystem

As anticipated in previous sections, accessibility cannot be confined within a technical-regulatory perimeter. It does not merely address the effects of access barriers, but also investigates their structural and cultural causes. To engage with this complexity, accessibility must be conceived as a multidimensional construct, articulated across four interconnected dimensions: (1) technical, (2) social, (3) organizational, and (4) generative.

The technical dimension refers to the knowledge of standards, regulations, and procedures, as well as to specific professional competencies. The social dimension encompasses values, ethical codes, policies, educational and communicative practices. The organizational dimension concerns governance processes, resource and service management, and monitoring activities. Finally, the generative dimension reflects the capacity to produce new forms of access, relationship, and meaning through creative, experimental, and transformative practices [57,58]. The examples associated with each dimension are illustrative rather than exhaustive and aim to convey their orientation without delimiting their scope. This multidimensional framework is visually synthesized in Figure 2.

Together, these four dimensions constitute what we define as the Cultural Generative Ecosystem of accessibility: a dynamic and relational system in which each dimension does not operate in isolation, but acts in synergy with the others, generating new forms of aggregation and hybridization.

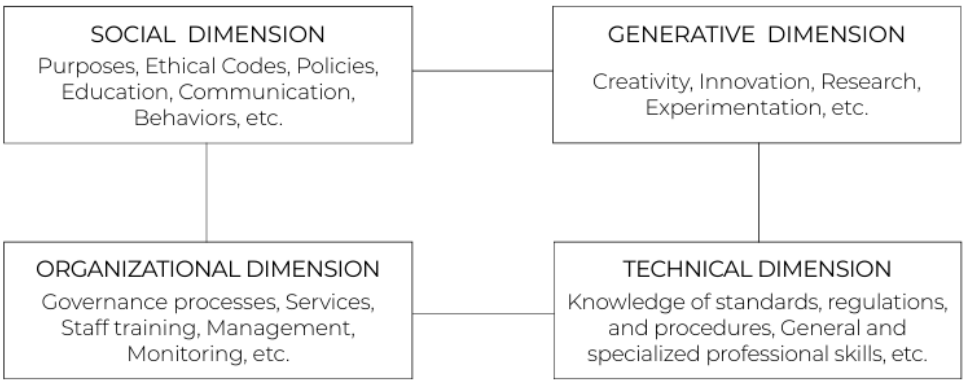


Figure 2. Accessibility as a cultural generative ecosystem (source: Authors).

The term ecosystem is employed here as an analytical category to describe a complex and interdependent environment, capable of evolving through meaningful relationships and transformative processes. This approach aligns with Virani's [59] reflections on global creative ecosystems, understood as cultural environments that support sustainable production and participation. It also resonates with Yang and Cao's [60] work on cultural ecosystem services, which highlights the role of culture as a generative and relational resource contributing to human well-being.

This framing builds upon the theoretical foundations laid out in Section 2.3, where accessibility is articulated through relational, spatial, and institutional fields of inquiry, and with Section 2.4, which emphasizes its generative potential as a condition for human flourishing.

3.3. The Determinants of Environmental Accessibility

Accessibility is a complex and multifaceted field of study, from which certain aspects (determinants) emerge as particularly significant. Focusing on disability, one of the key areas of diversity, the following six determinants are proposed as those that, according to the Authors, most influence accessibility in the built environment:

1. Accessibility as a polysemous concept: recognizes the plurality of meanings of the term, avoiding reductionism;
2. Accessibility as a contextual concept: highlights that accessibility depends on socio-spatial and cultural variables;
3. Accessibility as a multiscale and relational concept: introduces the territorial dimension and the interactions between actors, places and policies;
4. Accessibility as a corporeal and spatial-temporal concept: recognizes accessibility as an embodied and situated experience, mediated by the body and its dynamic relationship with space and time;
5. Accessibility as a multi-criteria concept: asserts that accessibility must be assessed according to a plurality of interrelated requirements;
6. Accessibility as a multi-component concept: integrates the different dimensions of human experience in space (physical, communicative, cognitive, emotional, organizational).

Together, these conceptual determinants reveal the layered nature of accessibility and its entanglement with space, time, culture, and human diversity. From this theoretical framework emerges a broader reflection on the meaning and value of accessibility in contemporary society, one that invites us to reconsider how we build, relate, and understand (see Figure 3).

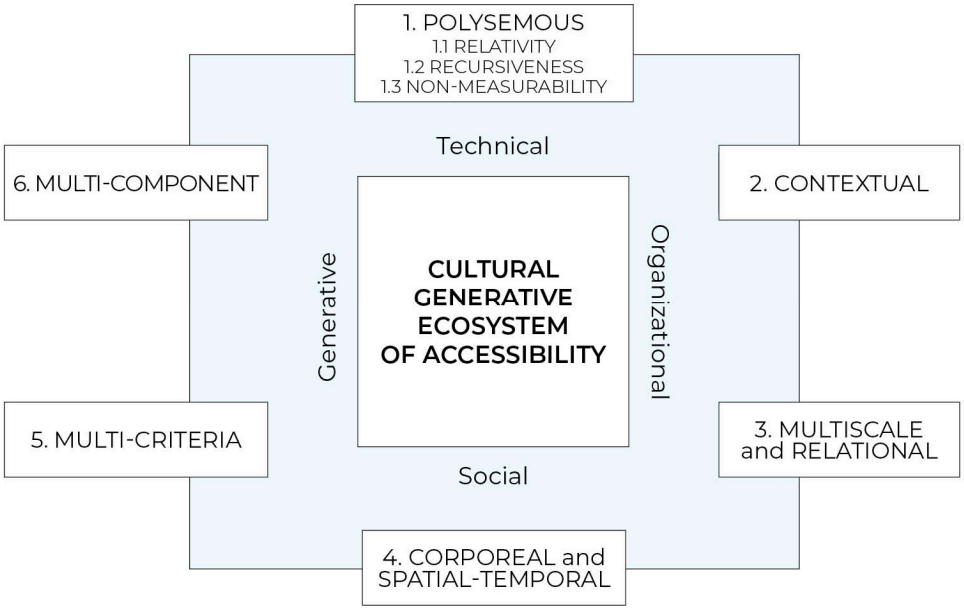


Figure 3. The six determinants of accessibility in dialogue with the four dimensions of the Cultural Generative Ecosystem of accessibility (source: Authors).

3.3.1. Accessibility as a Polysemous Concept

Accessibility is a *polysemous* concept, as *each person* reads, interprets, judges and contributes to defining the accessibility of a place, asset or service (hereinafter "place", for narrative simplicity) based on their own structural and contingent characteristics and needs. This concept reflects Plato's subjective and relativist interpretation in the *Theaetetus* of Protagoras of Abdera's famous fragment of a sentence: "Man is the measure of all things". As people differ from one another, each person interprets and judges a given phenomenon from their own point of view [61]. This view also aligns with the Capability Theory, which emphasizes that each individual differs in terms of personal characteristics and the social and environmental circumstances they experience [37,38].

It can be said that even though all human beings share the same nature and rights, every human being is unique. A human being is like a point in a sphere. In a sphere, each point is equidistant from the center and has no qualitative differences from the other points. Yet, each point, occupying a specific position in the sphere is different from all the others. A sphere, therefore, is an effective spatial metaphor for society.

In the design of policies, programs, plans and projects aimed at people in general, however, it is customary to classify people who have something in common into social groups (*user groups*). A society understood as a composition of social groups can be represented by a polyhedron. The more sides this polyhedron has—that is, the more refined the classification—the more it will asymptotically tend toward the sphere. The granularity of classification should reflect the specificity of the goals pursued.

The social categorization, which is rooted in Linnaean taxonomy, always offers a simplified (when not misleading) representation of reality. In his analysis of classic epistemology, Foucault [62] asserts that there are realities which do not give in to the attempts of manipulation of *mathesis*, and whose presence in our intellect requires an empirical inquiry, thus revealing what the universality of concepts fails to grasp. It is not uncommon to observe how the same scenario can offer dissimilar accessibility conditions not only to people from different user groups (e.g., adolescents and older adults; people with mobility impairments and people with visual impairments), but also individuals within the same user group. Paraphrasing a famous saying attributed both to Stephan Shore (for autistic people) and Tom Kitwood (for people with dementia), it can be said that when we meet

an adolescent we are not meeting 'adolescence', when we meet an old person, we are not meeting 'old age', when we meet a disabled person, we are not meeting the 'disability'. We are only meeting individual people.

Another three qualities of accessibility derive from polysemy: *relativity*, *recursiveness* and *non-measurability*.

Accessibility is a *relative* notion as neither the built space, nor knowledge or anything else can be thought of as absolutely accessible to everyone and/or in the same way. Moreover, as has been observed, what might be accessible to one person might not be to another. The concept of architectural barrier does not have an absolute value. "Architectural barrier" is the name that we give to elements and circumstances that hinder or prevent—for everyone, groups of people or specific people—an action or the achievement of a goal. Michelangelo's Grand Staircase in the Laurentian Library in Florence is a masterpiece of architectural history and one of the highest expressions of human genius in art. It would make no logical sense to consider it an architectural barrier. Nonetheless, the staircase 'becomes' an architectural barrier when it prevents a person from visiting the Reading Room and admiring *de visu* the wooden ceiling and plutei, the polychrome stained-glass windows or Tribolo's red and white terracotta floor.

Even judgment regarding the accessibility of a place, with the exception of checks on regulatory compliance which takes the binary form of 'up to standard'/'not up to standard', cannot be defined in an absolute sense, as an environmental quality that is there or is not there. Each person, on the basis of his or her abilities and prior and contextual knowledge, forms an opinion about the accessibility of a place and judges for himself or herself whether, to what extent, and in what way he or she could use it. The reliability of this opinion is closely linked to the quantity and quality of the information available. Between the *de jure* assessment (which answers the question "Is this place accessible?") and the subjective assessment (which answers the question "Can I access this place?") is an assessment based on the *degree of accessibility* (which answers the question: "For a certain user group, what level of autonomy does this place permit?") [63]. For each user group, degrees of accessibility are a concise expression of appropriately defined levels of qualitative satisfaction related to the level of personal autonomy that the environment permits. For example, with reference to people in wheelchairs, the degree of accessibility of a place might be: (i) *high*: accessible independently, (ii) *medium-high*: accessible independently with some difficulty, (iii) *medium*: accessible with assistance in limited situations, (iv) *medium-low*: accessible with a caregiver, (v) *low*: accessible with difficulty even with a caregiver, (vi) *none*: not accessible.

Accessibility is *recursive* as it is the expression of an endless process. Several factors underlie the need to periodically renew and analyze the accessibility assessments of a place and constantly implement the necessary actions to gradually improve its performance. For instance: (1) the ongoing transformations that shape human habitats—through a variety of actions and processes—as well as individual and collective behaviors, both voluntary and involuntary; (2) the increasingly refined analysis of user groups, from which new needs emerge and are gradually incorporated into regulatory frameworks; and (3) the advancement of scientific and technological research, which continuously provides designers with new opportunities and operational tools, ranging from digital infrastructures and communication platforms (ICTs) to adaptive systems capable of learning and contextual interaction (AI), thereby expanding cognitive and sensory capabilities of the users [64,65].

As accessibility has too many dynamically changing variables, *it cannot be measured* in quantitative terms. The geographer Peter Gould [66] (p. 64), who only had to deal with environmental variables, recognized that "Accessibility. . . is a slippery notion. . . one of those common terms that everyone uses until faced with the problem of defining and

measuring it!". When human variables are also introduced, when there is a shift from the abstraction of the average healthy adult to 'real people', things become enormously complicated [67,68]. While there is general awareness about the complexity of environmental scenarios, the same cannot be said for the individual user groups. What is defined as a "user group" is merely an intellectual construction, a world made up of multiple frameworks. Each framework is populated by people who have things in common and who express specific needs in their interaction with the environment and specific requests in terms of accessibility. Taking visually impaired people as an example, a distinction must be made between the blind and the visually impaired. With regard to blind people, there is an essential difference between people who are congenitally blind and those with acquired blindness. For both sub-categories, account must be taken of the type of support used while travelling (caregiver, long cane, guide dog, electronic aids, etc.) and the level of training in orientation and mobility (whether they are self-taught or have successfully followed specific training courses). Other 'effective' variables could be introduced. For example age and the coexistence of other functional limitations.

This polysemous framing reflects the epistemological and ethical stance developed in Section 2, where accessibility is conceived as a situated, relational, and evolving construct grounded in human diversity and care.

This conceptual openness also recalls the four dimensions of the Cultural Generative Ecosystem introduced in Section 3.2. Polysemy, by its very nature, engages technical variability, social diversity, organizational complexity, and generative potential, all of which contribute to reframing accessibility as a dynamic and context-sensitive principle.

In conclusion, it is necessary to accept the irreducible complexity of human beings. Reality is far more complex (and interesting) than it appears. Despite the laudable attempts made [69], there is no quantitative metric that can measure accessibility. As Sen wrote [70], quoting Carveth Read, "Even when precisely capturing an ambiguity proves to be a difficult exercise, that is not an argument for forgetting the complex nature of the concept and seeking a spuriously narrow exactness. In social investigation and measurement, *it is undoubtedly more important to be vaguely right than to be precisely wrong*." [italics added].

3.3.2. Accessibility as a Contextual Concept

Accessibility is *contextual* because, although the underlying principles are universal, the cultural approach as well as the operating solutions to achieve such principles are strongly constrained by the overall characteristics of the action scenario. Even this paper reflects the cultural perspective of its authors. Scholars from different cultural traditions or epistemic frameworks may, upon reading it, encounter conceptual or terminological elements that appear dissonant or even conflicting. Due to environmental, economic, social, cultural or technological obstacles, an effective solution to overcome an access problem in a certain context may prove to be inadequate or even impractical in another context. For example, in countries where the per capita income is less than 1 dollar per day and where above all in rural areas, the roads are often uneven and muddy, a traditional wheelchair is not only an aid unavailable to most paraplegics, but it would also be unsuitable for the characteristics of the road surface. It would quickly break and be difficult and expensive to repair [17,71].

The role of the context is pivotal even when working at a site that has particular historical-artistic value, where overcoming access problems usually requires ad hoc solutions. These solutions must be respectful of the building's historical and symbolic meanings and capable of achieving a balance between protecting the essence of the asset as a witness to the past and the usability of the spaces it encloses and the assets it houses [72].

This connotation of accessibility opens up a reflection on the concept of standard and the appropriateness of solutions to raise the autonomy of disabled people when working in contexts where resources (human, economic, social, information, etc.) are scarce or particularly valuable. More generally, it serves as a reminder that the context plays an essential ordering role in policies and interventions for accessibility. It filters and conditions their effectiveness.

This perspective reflects the conceptual structure introduced in Section 2, where the role of context aligns with institutional dynamics, and the need for culturally sensitive and site-specific solutions resonates with relational and spatial dimensions.

Moreover, the contextual sensitivity reflects the organizational dimension of accessibility, where governance choices and resource constraints shape the feasibility and appropriateness of solutions. It also resonates with the social dimension, insofar as cultural values and symbolic meanings influence how accessibility is interpreted and enacted.

3.3.3. Accessibility as a Multi-Scalar and Relational Concept

Accessibility ranges from the product to the region, spanning all scales of intervention. With a variety of priorities, aims, methods and operating tools, accessibility informs the work of the ergonomist, designer, architect, territorial planner, landscape architect and geographer. *Multi-scalarity* highlights the need to see accessibility in *relational* terms. Each environmental element is a link in a chain of relations, a hub in an interconnected network. If one of these links or hubs has access problems, it compromises the accessibility of the entire system. For example, a pedestrian crossing that is considered dangerous (because it is too long, there is too much traffic, it is not adequately lit at night, etc.) can for many people represent a break in the pedestrian mobility of a neighborhood, a barrier that prevents access to entire parts of the urban fabric. It is therefore necessary to develop an overall vision that can connect environmental elements effectively: from residences to the city, to the region. To this end, a public transport system inspired by accessibility principles plays a strategic role [73,74].

This multi-scalar and relational framing draws on the theoretical foundations laid out in Section 2, where accessibility is understood as a situated and systemic condition shaped by spatial, institutional, and relational dynamics.

It reflects the organizational dimension of accessibility, where coordination across scales and sectors is essential to ensure systemic usability. It also engages the technical dimension, insofar as infrastructure design and professional competencies play a key role in enabling inclusive mobility.

3.3.4. Accessibility as a Corporeal and Spatial-Temporal Concept

Accessibility is a privileged lens through which to explore the interplay between human activities and the spatial-temporal fabric of everyday life. It also serves to introduce the role of the body into the reflections on person-environment interactions [75,76], to cultivate the relationship between the body and the environment also when the body struggles to recognize itself in the environment and interact with it [77].

The time that is unnecessarily wasted on physically connecting the different spaces of life is, to all intents and purposes, a *barrier* [78]. A barrier that often generates fatigue and discomfort, in addition to frustration. For those waiting in line for a long time to receive a service at a public office or enter a museum, waiting time is a barrier. The discomfort can of course become much more pronounced in the case of older adults or people who struggle to maintain an upright position for a long time. A similar discomfort is experienced by people who are forced to wander from one part of the city to another to deal with a bureaucratic matter or take their children to school.

Intervention strategies to improve the use of time and mitigate inconveniences in the person–environment interaction may relate to management. These include: reducing unnecessary mobility, favoring online services and the home delivery of documents, slightly staggering school opening times, extending the opening hours of public offices that provide services to citizens, improving booking services, and enhancing personal training. Alternatively, these strategies may be environmental in nature, such as improving the transport system and complementary mobility equipment, or limiting inconvenience in waiting spaces by providing adequate equipment and furniture, and through the surface treatments of walls, the color, lighting, and so forth.

This corporeal and temporal framing resonates with the relational understanding of accessibility previously introduced in Section 2 and aligns with a broader ethical and rights-based perspective that places dignity, autonomy, and emotional well-being at the center of person-environment interactions.

It engages the generative dimension of accessibility, as it calls for creative and transformative responses to embodied discomfort and spatial-temporal exclusion. It also reflects the organizational dimension, insofar as management strategies and service design play a crucial role in mitigating barriers and enhancing everyday usability.

3.3.5. Accessibility as a Multi-Criteria Concept

Accessibility is *multi-criteria* because it is expressed through the coherent and comprehensive fulfillment of a number of environmental and technological requirements in relation to each other. For instance, accessing a place first and foremost presupposes the possibility of identifying and reaching it. Identifiability is the first link in the chain of information that defines how communicative a place is. Reachability, along with urban and suburban mobility, plays a strategic role in plans, programs and projects that aim to improve the accessibility of the urban and territorial spaces. In this sense, it should be viewed in relation to both public and private means of transport and complementary mobility facilities (public transport stops, parking spaces and parking bays for private vehicles, signage, etc.). Reachability may also concern parts of a building, such as interior spaces.

Once inside a place, accessibility implies the possibility of understanding it in symbolic, spatial and functional terms, the possibility of being able to navigate it and use it autonomously, in conditions of comfort and safety, and, lastly, the ability to take advantage of the human and environmental resources that characterize and support it. Within the class of accessibility requirements, it is useful to make a distinction between the requirements, often underestimated, that pertain to accessibility *to* a place (identifiability, reachability and 'external' mobility) and all the others, inherent to the accessibility *of* a place (usability, intelligibility, orientation and wayfinding, 'internal' mobility, comfort, safety of use, provision of furniture and equipment, cleanability, maintainability, etc.).

This structured and interrelated view of accessibility requirements reflects the conceptual articulation developed earlier in Section 2, where spatial and institutional aspects support autonomy and usability, and relational aspects inform the design of inclusive environments.

It also reflects the social and organizational dimensions of accessibility, as it involves value systems, policy frameworks, and governance mechanisms that shape how rights are recognized, implemented, and monitored across contexts. It further engages the technical dimension, through the integration of environmental and technological requirements that support inclusive design.

3.3.6. Accessibility as a Multi-Component Concept

Accessibility concerns both material assets and processes, such as spatial perception, communication, training and organization, as well as behavioral aspects, such as how the host deals with the needs, concerns and emotions of the guest. Among the different components of accessibility, we can identify some that are particularly relevant in strategic programming, planning and design activities: (1) *physical*, (2) *communicative*, (3) *cultural*, (4) *emotional*, (5) *socio-economic*, and (6) *organizational*.

The physical component of accessibility pertains to actions aimed at overcoming physical access problems. The communicative component is based on complex sensory-perceptual dynamics, and concerns initiatives and actions aimed at increasing orientation, recognition of sources of danger, and the intelligibility of places and services. The cultural component is the gateway to knowledge of the material substance of a place, its cultural and symbolic values and the human expressions that have historically characterized it. The emotional component involves the affective responses that environments elicit in individuals, including feelings of safety, comfort, dignity, and belonging. It concerns the capacity of spaces to make users feel welcome and reassured, and to support them in their emotional and psychological experience, particularly in situations of vulnerability, uncertainty, or stress. The socio-economic component is linked to the positive consequences that more accessible environments can bring about in the life of communities. The organizational component pertains to the broad theme of the management of services that enable a building to function properly over time.

The components of accessibility may vary in magnitude depending on the user group and action context. However, as they are closely related to each other, they must always be thought of in an integrated way, as parts of a whole [79].

This multi-component framing builds on the integrated approach previously outlined in Section 2, where relational, spatial, and institutional aspects converge with ethical and cultural principles to support inclusive and rights-oriented design.

It also reflects the four dimensions of the Cultural Generative Ecosystem of accessibility. The technical dimension is evident in the attention to spatial perception, communication, and training; the social dimension emerges through cultural values, emotional responses, and community impacts; the organizational dimension is embodied in service management and strategic planning; and the generative dimension is engaged through the capacity of environments to elicit new forms of relationship, meaning, and care.

4. Conclusions

These reflections show that accessibility seems to be a fluid, elusive and complex notion. Complexity is an inescapable quality of accessibility. It must be taken as a given. A sectoral, technical, or deterministic approach risks falling into naïve reductionism, distorting the concept and preventing it from fully expressing its potential.

We need to move toward a complex idea of reality, where what is being discussed—including people—must not be thought of as an entity that is not aligned with the 'norm' (*a world apart*), but as an expression of human nature (*a part of the world*), as something that is 'ours'. As the Roman playwright Terence said: "Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto" ['I am human, and I think nothing human is alien to me']. Making the world around us more accessible allows us to recognize our own life in others, sharing an otherwise foreign experience.

Accessibility thereby becomes an epistemological corrective that opens up new horizons of knowledge about all of humanity and, more specifically, the part of humanity that encounters specific difficulties in enjoying the original good that is common life. A human "second nature" is also constructed in this way: a generative context that confirms the value of human dignity and infuses ethics into the art of building.

The absolute artifice that is the city must open up to *real people* in order to create opportunities, experiences, culture and beauty and, if possible, transcribe social relations into the me-you language, even when "you" is an expression of human vulnerability [80]. In this sense, accessibility can be seen as the connective tissue of a cultural generative ecosystem, an evolving framework through which spaces, practices, and relationships are reconfigured to affirm human dignity and foster inclusive urban life.

The reflections developed in Section 3 confirm that accessibility cannot be reduced to a single disciplinary lens or operational logic. It unfolds instead across technical, social, organizational, and generative dimensions, each contributing to a broader cultural ecosystem in which access is continuously redefined through situated practices, relational configurations, and ethical commitments.

It resembles the altar dedicated to an unknown god who might knock at any time in our lives to add new value to an urban reality increasingly made in the image of man.

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