

Accessibility Programme and School Restoration in Lisbon

The City of Lisbon, Portugal, is working to better integrate children with disabilities at primary school level. It recently has undertaken an accessible school programme and has restored an historic building as part of this effort.

ACCESSIBLE SCHOOL PROGRAMME

By **Pedro Homem de Gouveia, Lisbon City Council, Portugal**

A school should give every user the opportunity to participate in its activities and to use its resources in a way that is direct, immediate and as autonomous as possible. With this in mind, the City of Lisbon launched a programme called *Escola Aberta* (literally “open school”) in 2003 to adapt the physical environment of public primary schools under its jurisdiction.

Accessibility implies two things: the adequacy of educational practices (including programmes and strategies for children with special needs) and the convenience of the physical environment.

A child with a disability may challenge the school’s educational practices in ways that are difficult to overcome. One must bear in mind, however, that a child with a disability is, first and foremost, a child – with the same need for and right to interaction with his or her peers. An accessible physical environment is a pre-condition for implementing any educational programme based on integration.

The goal of Lisbon’s *Escola Aberta* programme is to bring the schools into compliance with the Portuguese law for accessibility. However, since some of the standards enacted by this law are inadequate for children or not sufficiently demanding, the programme was influenced by other sources as well, like the Americans with Disabilities Act Design Guidelines.

The programme requires an accessible school to have a network of accessible spaces. This network consists of an accessible path that connects the entrance point in the exterior perimeter of the school to all other accessible spaces.

The accessible path must be continuous, uninterrupted and as regular as possible. It should also coincide with the school’s main circulation paths.

The school’s set of accessible spaces connected by this path must include:

- a) Main entrance and atrium.
- b) At least four classrooms (one per primary year).
- c) All spaces where resources for use by the students are located (or one of each type).
- d) Gymnasium including auxiliary spaces such as showers, and a number of accessible seats when there are bleachers.
- e) Canteen and bar.

- f) Office.
- g) At least one of each additional common space that may exist.
- h) At least one restroom, preferably integrated.
- i) Exterior play areas, namely play fields, socialising areas and play structures.
- j) Pick-up area for passengers and, whenever possible, reserved parking space closest to entrance gate.

Adapting Lisbon's existing primary schools may involve the following types of intervention:

- a) Making alterations to the building (e.g. placing ramps, widening doors).
- b) Installing specific fixed elements (e.g. grab bars, larger light switches, contrasting strips in the edges of steps, new signage).
- c) Installing electromechanical platforms (with proper staff training on operation and safety).
- d) Installing adapted furniture for general use (e.g. work surfaces, lockers).
- e) Changing the function of rooms, when more economical and equally effective.

Adaptations made under the *Escola Aberta* programme are intended to benefit the school community in general, since accessibility makes the school a more functional, safe and comfortable environment. Another city programme is responsible for installing assistive devices for personal use (*i.e.*, geared for specific individual needs).

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The accessible school programme will enable more and more children with disabilities to attend Lisbon's primary schools while providing the community with the opportunity to improve integration.

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Ramp

RESTORING AN HISTORIC BUILDING

By Nuno Morais and António Miranda, Bairro Alto and Bica Project Unit, Lisbon City Council, Portugal

Lisbon has restored a 200-year-old mansion to house the *Escola Padre Abel Varzim*, a kindergarten and primary school, which opened its doors in September 2005 for the new school year.

The work carried out by the city was designed not only to reverse the neglected state of the property but also to bring the facilities up to the newly legislated standards of safety, accessibility and mobility for buildings of this nature. In fact, it was to ensure universal mobility and circulation within the building that the greatest alterations were made. An electromechanical platform was installed as well as a number of wheelchair ramps. For safety reasons, a new, enclosed staircase was constructed, allowing vertical access to all floors, and an outside fire escape was added.

Underlying the project was a concern to reconcile the specific operational needs of an educational establishment with appropriate technical, organisational and aesthetic solutions that would respect the constraints inherent to adapting a building with significant heritage features and converting it to new functions.

Little is known about the origins of this late 18th century mansion situated in the city's *Bairro Alto*. In the 19th century, it belonged to the Sousa Azevedo family, the viscounts of Algés. From the last years of the 19th century until 1910 it served as headquarters and showroom for *Marcenaria 1º de Dezembro*, a famous Lisbon woodworking establishment that produced and popularised Thonet and Art Nouveau furniture. In 1912 the building was let for use by two primary schools, the *Escolas Centrais* #12 (boys) and #21 (girls), and it continued in this status until May 2004, when it was acquired by the Lisbon City Council.

Recognition of the building's historic, artistic and archaeological value was fundamental in deciding technical options and defining the most suitable approach to the renovations. For example, the project restored to use an old passageway that allowed coaches entering at the upper level to descend a ramp that traversed the building down to the lower-level garden and patio, where the coach-house and the door to the street were located.

The project also included conservation and restoration work to preserve the elaborate decorative elements that add so much to the quality of the heritage structure. Notable features include the *pombalino* figurative tile panels with rococo style framing and box-framed ceilings, as well as a room with neoclassical wall paintings.



Main entrance



Classroom



Free time work room

Also restored was the one remaining 18th century dormer window, with its late-baroque wooden mouldings, that looks out on a narrow lane, the *Travessa da Boa Hora*.

By adapting for school use a structure with the formal features described above, the project has helped to make the building itself a component of the users' learning experience.

Technical details

Property area: 760 m²

Gross floor area: 1 712 m²

Number of students: up to 120 primary + 25 kindergarten

Capital cost: approximately EUR 1.5 million

Work began: April 2003

Work completed: September 2005

Promoter and architect: Bairro Alto and Bica Project Unit, DRGUP-DMCRU, Lisbon City Council

Specialised services: Municipal Directorate for Projects and Works, Lisbon City Council



Teachers' room

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