Bri Cloutier

Main Article Draft 1

Topic: Accessibility in Valencia

14 July 2024

Navigating the Old & New

The day I arrived in Valencia, I nearly fell onto the cobblestone twice. When I entered the elevator in my apartment, I had to press myself against the wall so my suitcase and I could squeeze in the minute contraption, and when I arrived on my floor, I pushed the suitcase out in front of me, as the hallway was so thin both me and my 49.6 pounds of maxi skirts and sandals could not possibly fit beside each other.

Later, as I walked around the *Plaza de la Virgen* for the first time, I took in the glorious architecture and aged cathedrals that were just steps from my fully furnished, AC-equipped apartment. It was a comfort on my first day – being in a city so old but so thoughtfully intertwined with modernity. Even so, Valencia’s antiquity raised some questions for me.

In high school, I had an American Sign Language teacher who was passionate about advocating for the rights of the hearing impaired. At times, it seemed as if we spent more time discussing Deaf Culture and Deaf Rights than we did learning the language, but I grew to appreciate her insistency on our mindfulness. It’s a lesson I’ve carried with me to Spain.

Would the average wheelchair fit inside the apartment’s tiny elevator? Would navigating the cobblestone streets be all the more stressful for visually impaired folks? How could a city with such rich history integrate proper functions for accessibility while maintaining integrity?

A trip to the La Almonia museum examples a successful integration of accessibility measures amidst a historical site. The museum takes visitors over a series of ancient ruins dating back to 138 BC (La Almonia Website). A string of glass stairs, walkways, and best of all, ramps, allows museumgoers to view ancient Roman bathhouses, gravesites, and government buildings below and around them. At La Almonia, ancient meets present in a fascinating way, and best of all, the museum is equipped with elevators and ramps so that differently abled folks have an equal opportunity to enjoy learning about the city’s history. In this way, the buildings construction is accessible and sustainable from the ground up.

Historical preservation doesn’t mean “putting things in a glass box” says FSU Valencia Urban Planning Professor Tisha Joseph Holmes. “History is not only about structure. Keeping the structure is important, but having people learn and understand and touch and be in that experience is also part of the historical process.”. For Holmes, preserving a city’s historicity is for naught if there are no systems in place allowing all people to enjoy and learn from it.

With modern technology, access can look a little different, too. For example, Professor Holmes suggested the use of a 360 camera on top of Valencia’s famed *Torres de Serranos* to provide viewing access to those who can not climb the towers.

Additionally, online guides like *Visit Valencia* and *Accessible Spain Travel* offer comprehensive guides for differently abled folks looking to explore Spain. These websites provide contact information and resources for restaurants, museums, historical sites, guided tours, hotels, and transportation services; allowing peace of mind for differently-abled people wishing to travel to Valencia.

Although this is not an example of equal access, it shows a collective effort towards inclusivity, a sentiment Valencians have been working towards via the city’s 2030 Urban Plan. According to their website, the Plan is a “roadmap that will allow a comprehensive, innovative, shared and transformative development of the city for the next decade.”

The plan has six “Looks” for Valencia, one of which being the Shared City. According to their website, this Look is “the one that boost citizen participation in the creation of public policies aimed at the common good and equality.”

Professor Holmes says that “(the process) seems really robust and thoughtful.”, explaining how Valencia’s Urban Planners spoke with a variety of neighborhoods, stakeholders, and partners while forming goals for the project. For Holmes, it is particularly important to hear from those who are directly affected by any changes in the urban sector because “they are the experts.” Highlighting these voices will lead to extensive and lasting solutions.

Valencia’s commitment to inclusivity has already been acknowledged: in 2022, it was chosen as the World Design Capitol, and in 2023, it was titled a UNESCO Creative City.

It’s hard to imagine that a city over two thousand years old