

Making cities more accessible for everyone

October 31 2014, by Dominic Ali



Ron Buliung's interest in urban design initially started with his travels to Europe and India where he saw how different cities dealt with issues such as space, wealth, poverty, street life, congestion and transport.

But his research became intensely personal with the birth of his youngest daughter, who was born with the genetic neuromuscular disease known as [spinal muscular atrophy](#). The disease profoundly limits her physical mobility, and she requires a power chair to move around on her own.

"The moment of her diagnosis instantly changed how I saw the city," says Buliung.

An associate professor of geography with the University of Toronto's Mississauga campus, Buliung conducts research that explores the relationship between accessibility and mobility in built environments, such as cities. Writer Dominic Ali spoke with Buliung about how [urban areas](#) can be made more accessible so that they can be enjoyed by all residents, from families with children in power chairs or strollers to seniors with limited mobility.

Is Toronto's urban design as inclusive as it could be?

I would argue that Toronto's strength still centres around the non-disabled. Our cities remain hostile places riddled with unfathomable barriers to people who have various challenges – be they cognitive or physical.

What are some examples?

Let's consider the elevator service to the TTC subway. We've heard the stories about people getting stuck in stations, and many people with various disabilities refuse to use the service outright.

I would challenge anyone reading this to take note of the subway map the next time you take a ride and really study where the accessible stations are. And consider what it would be like for you, in the middle of winter, if you needed to back track several blocks while in a wheelchair.

Do you have any favourite cities when it comes to urban design that Toronto could use as a model?

I am an obsessed road cyclist and bicycle commuter, so I have a particular appreciation for cities where the bicycles are embedded within the everyday lives of city dwellers. We have a fascinating urban and

political geography, neighbourhoods of all shapes, and people from everywhere. I think Toronto should be its own model, and figure out how to do things with help from the public and the local experts that we have here at the University of Toronto, and at the other universities, firms and other institutions located across the region.

What's the biggest challenge facing Toronto's design?

We can't continue to let our aging infrastructure decay. (The situation on the Gardiner is embarrassing and could have ended in tragedy.) And of course we absolutely must figure out this congestion problem. We are not going to build our way out of it with new roads. We also need to do more thinking and planning on how to accommodate for the challenges that face an aging society, while considering how universal or inclusive design can improve the quality of life for others, including children facing various cognitive or physical challenges.

What is a fascinating feature you've learned from your research that our readers might not know about?

Most of my work during the last seven years has focused on childhood, mobility, health and [urban design](#).

Through our research, we've learned that where today's children and youth decide to settle in the future, and how they choose to commute may relate to their childhood experiences. As an example, children who learn how to ride a bicycle and always have access to one, will use the bicycle as an option as they get older. But to develop this, cities need places where children can safely learn to cycle, which is a political, economic, and land-use planning issue.

In addition, girls participating in our research were less likely to actively

travel to and from school than boys. Our work, and previous research going back to the 1960s, also show that boys are more likely to have greater freedom (less adult supervision) to move about the city than girls.

We've also found that there is typically greater use of "active transport" (such as walking) for the trip home after school than in the morning. We might challenge parents who drive their children to school in the morning on the way to work to reconsider the practice. It could reduce traffic volume and result in more [children](#) walking to school.

Provided by University of Toronto

Citation: Making cities more accessible for everyone (2014, October 31) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-cities-accessible.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--