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“Making Spaces Accessible – One Tile at a Time”

It has become imperative for contemporary space designers, architects and planners to think about the issue of accessibility in the context of physically-challenged citizens. While new buildings and spaces can be integrated with sophisticated systems for access, how do we ensure that our existing spaces be made more democratic, humble and accessible for all!

When was the last time you saw a differently abled person on a wheelchair enjoying the sun on a public beach?

When we think of accessibility, we often think of creating spaces that have a built-in equity, a space that caters to all—the young, the old, all genders, the differently-abled, people who are not within the ‘standard archetype’ of the individual for whom we design. Even after two decades into the twenty-first century, we still struggle with the basics—to make everyday interaction with the world easy for an individual who does not fit the ‘working standard’ profile. Very few of our parks, railway platforms, hospitals, schools, offices, banks, police stations, cinema houses, malls and museums are truly accessible without aid for a person with special needs.

There is a paradigm shift in this thinking in contemporary design. With social media and a new youth culture that is more open, accepting, empathetic and sensitive, we are heading towards a world with greater equity and equality. A world where transgender people are on *Vogue* covers, where 92-year-old climbs summits, where an autistic individual is among the wealthiest in the world and where people on wheelchair participate in triathlons!

A few years back, we came across an incredible short-film about how three wheelchair-bound people were enabled to access the beach—all on their own—in Goa. We were surprised with the simple, eloquent idea—a Red Ramp—that facilitated this unique excursion. The ramp—built using special ‘Endura’ brand tiles researched and manufactured by India-based company H&R Johnson, forms a gentle slope over sand from the street to the tideline on the beach. What followed was sheer joy and elation! The beach and the sea were suddenly accessible by individuals who take aid of a wheelchair or crutches. A simple idea transformed the way one views and uses the public beach.

We reached out to Dinesh Vyas, Building Material Expert and Advisor at H&R Johnson (India) to understand more about their products and initiatives that help make public spaces safe and accessible. *“For a tile company when it comes to make tiles for flooring, safety must be a concern. H & R Johnson was first to address floor safety when it launched a campaign and product for Indian bathrooms highlighting the need to have anti-skid floor and prevent falls and trips in bathrooms which are often wet. Going forward, they also developed and designed their Tac Tile series of floor tiles which has the foot-braille to assist visually impaired people in navigation at public places”* he says.

Tac Tiles—now an omnipresent product on all new railway, metro and bus stations across India—have revolutionised the way in which a simple modulation in the flooring surface can bring about a significant change in public access and safety. The blind can now access spaces and read circulation by reading the tactile patterns on the floor. The elderly has better grip on uneven surfaces and the people who use this infrastructure on an everyday basis have a protection against slippages and accidents. Mr Vyas adds that *“The R&D initiative of H&R Johnson (India) had invested significant resources in developing products that focus specifically on safety for the elderly, the differently-abled. Another product promising safety that I personally like is tiles for surfaces which have little slope (ramps) and often contaminated which makes them slippery; their recent offering Max-grip addresses this safety challenge and they got in-house testing facilities as per German R-Value standards – DIN 51130 and 51097 to produce R-13, R-12, R-11& R10 rated products which have much higher slip resistance as compared to ordinary matte tiles often assumed as slip-resistant tiles.”*

As a progressive society, we must design with empathy for all—for the people who fit the ‘standard’ and for all those who may be left out. Accessibility is one of the most critical areas of thinking and action where small interventions in the form of accessible design and retrofitting for access can make an enormous difference in the way people perceive public space. This change, although slow, is surely in the undercurrents of contemporary architecture and will contribute to a society that is safe, accessible and equitable for all: one tile at a time!