

Pauline Hephaistos Survey Projects (PHSP)

Over the years, the PHSP group has produced some twenty access guides, including the first guidebook for disabled persons ever to be called 'Access', and that was *Access in Paris* in 1974.

The group of surveyors includes a variety of people, some able-bodied, some wheelchair users and some disabled walkers. We come from several universities and colleges, from St Paul's School in London and from Lord Mayor Treloar College near Alton in Hampshire. A few of the group are 'post-student' age, and are working in a variety of jobs.

The name sounds a bit of a mouthful, but *Pauline* arises from St Paul, and some of us come from a Christian group attached to St Paul's School called the Pauline Meeting. The *Hephaistos* part of the name arises from the Greek god who was the smithy, and the equivalent of Vulcan in Roman mythology. He was a son of Zeus, who was foolish enough to defend his mother, Hera, during some major row. Zeus kicked Hephasitos off Mount Olympus and, after a long fall, he landed at the bottom and broke his leg. In frescoes he is shown with one leg facing one way, and the other turned through 90°. He has been adopted by some as the Greek god for disabled people, and gave his name to a school near Reading which a number of the group attended before its closure.

PHSP guidebooks are based around several principles, and they aim:

- to provide practical and well-researched information for disabled people and those who have difficulties in getting around who want to travel, and get out and about;
- to provide information which is firmly based on the experience of disabled people;
- to set new standards in terms of a clear and concise descriptive presentation of access information; and,
- to be a catalyst for change, both by making people more aware of what needs to be done, and by showing what is currently possible.

In an ideal world, High Street travel agents, conventional guide writers, tourist offices and website information would include details about access. However, the diversity of of the issues is so great, that to expect sources such as tourist boards, tour operators and guide writers to provide what is needed is probably unrealistic. At best, such organisations tend to go only as far as to say that somewhere is 'accessible' or it is 'not accessible', by which they generally mean step free. This begs so many questions as to be misleading for much of the time. Places might be described as being not accessible, when the only barrier is two steps, and many chair users travelling around with friends, for example, would be able to manage. Other places might be described as 'accessible', because they are step-free, but there may be large distances involved, or steepish slopes.

There are several problems inherent in the judgemental approach, and in the use of 'standards', such as those applied to hotels in this country:

- **firstly**, in attempting to impose a degree of consistency, people have focused on the perspective and needs of one subset of the disabled community, wheelchair users. This is based on the assumption that they always have the most demanding

- requirements, which is not always the case;
- **secondly**, it is difficult to arrive at satisfactory and objective criteria, and when stringent guidelines are followed, most listings are heavily weighted towards the more/most expensive facilities (particularly for accommodation);
 - **thirdly**, general publications such as guidebooks, theatre listings and the telephone directory, suffer from having to make gross generalisations. It is simply not enough to say that a cinema is ‘accessible’, and in practically every situation more information is needed. Another organisation called *Artsline* provides this for entertainment venues in London, and it too bases all its information on visit as well as describing the access barriers, so that people can make up their own mind about going to a venue. We would like to highlight this as being ‘good practice’;
 - **fourthly**, the existence of standards encourages the attitude “well, we’ve fulfilled the criteria”. People can even become less willing to try to react positively to individual needs. In addition, many people will not try to adapt their premises, because they appear to be such a long way from meeting the standard, yet small and probably inexpensive changes could bring substantial benefit to disabled people.

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