

**Presentation Title:**

Accessibility of Shared Space areas for visually impaired people

**Presenter:**

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**Qualifications of presenter**

Specialist in orientation and mobility research and mobility aids for visually impaired people.

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**ABSTRACT**

**Context:** Shared Space is a relatively new concept for the design of the public realm, which strives to improve the quality of public spaces and to facilitate people's activities. This should imply inclusive and safe design for all users. In the Shared Space concept the various functions of the public domain are combined, rather than separated. In particular, Shared Space aims to balance the traffic function in public spaces with other human activity by mixing slow and motorised traffic. In the absence of a physical separation between different road users, traffic flows mingle and the behavior of road users is mainly determined by social relations and human interaction, not exclusively by conventional traffic regulations. This is expected to lead to a reduction of speed differences and safer traffic. Since Shared Space offers good prospects for a less restrictive way of designing public spaces and for meeting the desires of the public, the interest of policy makers in the concept is rapidly growing. Theoretically, the concept offers the possibility to develop pleasant and safe environments for all users. However, for visually impaired people the required human interaction is difficult, or even impossible, and the lack of conventional infrastructure might lead to problems with orientation and navigation. Therefore, the Shared Space concept is a potential disadvantage, if not a danger, for this specific group.

**Aim:** Our project strives to assess the characteristics of current Shared-Space locations in the Netherlands and to judge the advantages or threats with respect to the independent accessibility for visually impaired persons. The current presentation describes the assessment of characteristics of 10 selected Shared-Space locations, as well as the actual experiences with Shared Space for blind and partially sighted persons who were interviewed for this purpose.

**Methods:** Ten Shared Space environments in the northern part of the Netherlands have been selected to assess their common characteristics and to be judged on possible problems for the accessibility for visually impaired people. In addition seventeen visually impaired persons have been interviewed about their experiences in Shared Space areas. They all live in the vicinity of a typical Shared-Space location and visit this place independently on a regular base.

**Results:** The inventory of characteristics of the selected Shared Space environments resulted in a list of possible threats for visually impaired persons. Individual opinions and experiences of the group of respondents in the interviews were diverse. All of the theoretical threats of Shared Space were confirmed by one or more respondents as being a actual problem. Some respondents did not experience much difficulty.

**Conclusion:** At least part of the visually impaired population experiences specific characteristics of Shared Space as a problem for independent mobility. The development of each individual Shared Space location requires a thorough analysis of possible threats for the accessibility for visually impaired people.