

My Journey to the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games

By Sally Swanson, AIA

Background

For more than 30 years Sally Swanson Architects, Inc. (SSA) has provided architecture, planning and management services to a variety of public and private sector clients with a particular focus on inclusive design. Since its founding in 1980, the firm has developed a breadth and depth of experience creating accessible environments that few other firms can match. In addition to our architectural experience, SSA has a long standing relationship with the California Division of the State Architect (DSA) providing not only plan check services but also training DSA staff in Access-related matters. In the context of this practice, SSA has developed a specialty in accessible design, universal design and wayfinding.

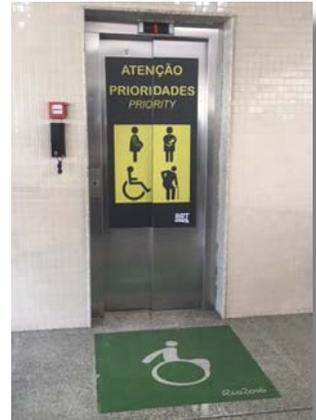
Personal History with the Paralympics

As a Paralympic reporter, as well, for the U.S. Paralympics, a division of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), I have witnessed the success stories from the Beijing 2008 Summer Paralympic Games to the 2010 Winter Paralympics in Vancouver and the London 2012 Paralympic Games, 2014 Olympic/Paralympic Winter Games in Sochi and the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. That success and the universal design and wayfinding lessons learned will further enhance the para-sport experience of para-athletes, and all participating athletes, in the fast-approaching 2018 Winter Games in PyeongChang, South Korea.



Why Wayfinding is Important for the Olympic/Paralympic Games

One moves through the present day with a certain speed that most everyone takes for granted. It's important to know how to get from one physical place to another in record time (or so it seems) whether by plane, train or on foot. But what does one need to know in order to find one's way upon arriving at one's destination? The design of intuitive spaces and providing the right set of audible, tactile or visual cues can be a challenge, yet so much depends on achieving the right balance. Whether one is a person with disabilities or able-bodied, imagine arriving in a foreign country unable to read or speak the language. Now imagine what it might entail to navigate through a Paralympic event in a country that does not speak your language. Seems a bit daunting doesn't it?



Inclusive Design for the Olympic/Paralympic Games

Wayfinding is simply a method in which one is able to orient one's self to their physical space, interpret one's surroundings, and navigate from one place to another. It focuses on making all parts of one's environment easily understood. Wayfinding may include certain elements such as kiosks, apps, truncated domes, signage, Braille maps, landmarks, tactile and audible support and direction.

Whether a building, facility, stadium or street, wayfinding helps to orient all users to their environment and understand how to get from one point to another successfully without a great deal of frustration and wasted time.

My consistent experience at the above mentioned Paralympic games is that wayfinding was forgotten.



Finding My Way at the Rio 2016 Games

Bravo, Rio!

I was surprised that it would take me several weeks to talk about my Rio 2016 visit. When I returned from Rio I had a plethora of feelings that took me several weeks to resolve, and effectively identify my key experiences at Rio 2016. My goals, as I'd identified them before leaving for Rio, were first, to reach out and share my access expertise with the International Paralympic Committee (IPC), second, visit with the Russian IPC leaders I had worked with in Sochi and, lastly, experience the Rio 2016 Olympic/ Paralympic Park to see if in fact an accessible environment had been realized. I was determined to be critical.

With all these goals in tow, I'll be the first to admit that I felt uneasy about



departing for Rio de Janeiro on September 3, 2016 as a media representative accredited by the United States Olympic Committee to cover the Rio 2016 Paralympics. I wondered how the Paralympians would fare, as well as this reporter! So, after finally touching down in Rio on the morning of September 4th I prepared myself to further understand the city which would be my home base for the next two weeks.

Exploring Rio on my own was an immersive learning experience. Cabs were costly, and the roads were constantly jammed with traffic, which meant that getting from one venue to the next was time consuming as well. Experiencing the new Rio Metro line, just completed for the Games, was very positive. Even better, the Rio Metro was designed with persons with disabilities in mind and had wayfinding integrated in the transit system design. Rio Metro representatives shared that they had many meetings with individuals who had physical limitations, and other city representatives who wanted a simple, easy to understand, and intuitive transportation system that would accommodate citizens from around the world. In addition, local funds were made available so that shopkeepers were motivated to create accessible entrances to their stores. All around me, these accessible entrances served as a metaphor for Rio's enthusiasm and desire to welcome visitors.

Rio de Janeiro may never have shone as brightly as it did for the Opening Ceremony. The Maracanã was packed with Brazil's citizens who cheered and applauded throughout the night. The Brazilian music had everyone swaying and dancing in their seats throughout the ceremony.

And it was here that I began to see firsthand how a variety of accessible codes were implemented; a somewhat random selection of codes that differed at various locations. An inconsistent mélange of accessible solutions for ramps, handrails, signage, entrances and restrooms that didn't conform at all to the U.S. ADA standards with which I'm most familiar. I concluded that a common approach to accessibility was not pursued. Many of the temporary game locations did not adhere to an accessibility standard because they were providing only temporary access and so these installations felt random and were virtually unmonitored for compliance.



Incongruous, too, was the complete lack of spatial planning within the games sites – whether a temporary or fixed facility – and the Metro connections. Wayfinding was an outright forgotten element.

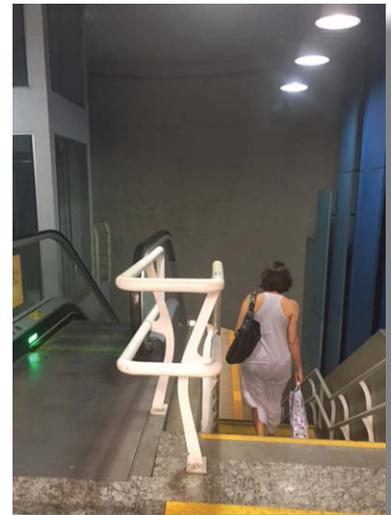
I understood that the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) was to implement the spatial planning to be incorporated with the wayfinding. It was shared that cost was a determining factor. How disturbing then to learn that concrete sidewalks needed to be cut – after the fact – for curb cuts, ramps, handrails and installation of ramps at restrooms. Having not been included in the initial design, these savage and necessary cuts into poured and hardened concrete struck me like an open wound.

My history as a reporter to the Beijing, Vancouver, London, Sochi and now Rio Paralympics prepared me to view the proceedings with a critical eye. So, I was disheartened that the IPC had not taken a leadership role in implementing wayfinding into an architectural setting such as a critical transportation hub that requires directional support not only for those with disabilities, but every individual. Both Olympic and Paralympic participation requires that principles of urban design be applied consistently so that wayfinding anchors an environment ensuring that all spaces are enjoyable, easy to use and accessible to all regardless of one's abilities.

In Beijing, initial innovative steps were taken to aid in navigating the spatial landscape, while in Vancouver para-athletes complained that the Village in Whistler did not provide accessible restaurants, pathways, or restrooms. In London, by contrast, a human wall of individuals served to direct one to any given location. I was hopeful for Sochi, as I helped to design the Paralympic and Universal Design Standards, but was yet again dismayed. Although the accessibility was the best at these Winter Games, the wayfinding was abysmal as I dropped nearly two feet (it certainly felt that far a drop) when stepping off a sidewalk.

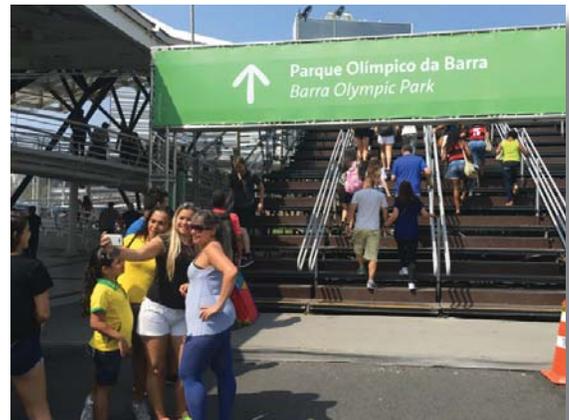
I cannot stress enough the importance in understanding the relationship that wayfinding poses to spatial planning and the need to integrate wayfinding into the initial architectural planning of an Olympic/Paralympic event. Let me explain: Trip segments consist of decision-making points. Spatial planning requires the analysis of the series of trip segments that one must take within a given Olympic/Paralympic environment. Understanding these segments serves as a framework for identifying decision points, and, ultimately for establishing wayfinding patterns at these decision points. For example, locating entrances, exits, specific directional instruction, and all major destinations require decision points.

Directional information supported by signage, code-mandated signage,



color coding, tactile surfaces, and visual and audible enhancement systems as well as electronic files usable with text-to-text speech technology beacons need to occur before one enters any environment and must continue to assist along the path of travel at mid-level wayfinding destination points. All visitors must be able to detect by visual, audible or tactile means any changes to surfaces as one navigates through an environment.

I am hoping to work collaboratively with the IPC to work out the next best steps towards an inclusive environment that focuses on wayfinding in time for the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Games.



For now, though, let's get back to Rio. What especially moved me throughout these Rio Summer Games, was the extensive participation of countries that had only minimal participation in the four previous Olympic/Paralympic events I have attended. The large numbers of para-athletes participating in each country's events told the story that being disabled in a third world country was less a stigma; more an honor. This acceptance pointed to a mainstreaming and acceptance of Paralympic athletes. Further, I learned that there were funds to train para-athletes for these events. An independent sponsored IPC had para-athletes from Syria and Palestine. It was wonderful to see participants from Georgia, Malawi, Seychelles and three countries in the Congo region. Along with these relative "newcomers" were the traditional powerhouses, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, China, and Japan. I was overjoyed to see many women participate from Muslim countries. This kind of support for female Paralympic athletes speaks strongly to the notion of women's rights around the world.





At the Games themselves, from wheelchair tennis to wheelchair basketball, I experienced sheer amazement and excitement at the agility and ability of the para-athletes as each one moved gracefully and with strength – every point well earned! As the German women’s wheelchair basketball team shot basket after basket, I was taken with their movement as if they were ballerinas on stage. Such beauty to behold! The Spanish tennis player was thrilling to watch as he spun around the court. Support staff had to rush to his side to wipe his brow. His movements were thrilling to experience as he went on to win the match. Throughout the Games the Brazilians’ enthusiasm was contagious and their passion for competition, and for all athletes, was heartwarming. The Brazilian Government made funds available to families so that they might attend what may be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. The kissing game projected onto a huge screen drew applause as a camera focused on a couple, young or old, which prompted them to kiss the individual sitting next to them. (Choose your seat mate carefully!!) The audience’s exuberant cheers catapulted me to laughter, and the energy was nonpareil.



I made lasting connections with contacts new and old during the Rio 2016 Paralympics, and, most importantly, I finally achieved a long-held and desired goal of being asked to participate - regarding accessibility and Universal Design - with the IPC, which is responsible for the management and governance of ten Paralympic sports. Hopefully I will be included in the IPC code committee.

President Obama’s last speech to the United Nations as President – on the day following the Closing Ceremony, spoke volumes to me, and my experience at Rio 2016. Obama’s words resounded and inspired when he said:



“We can choose to press forward with a better model of cooperation and integration. Or...retreat into a world sharply divided...” *“In remote corners of the world, citizens are demanding respect for the dignity of all people no matter their gender, or race, or religion, or disability...”*

At the outset of this article I spoke about my difficulty in reconciling my experience at Rio 2016. I

credit our President with finding words that I perhaps did not, but I can say with great confidence, that I saw a great *"model of cooperation and integration"* throughout my stay in Rio, and, most importantly, evidenced by the camaraderie of the para-athletes. What the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games meant to me was a city that welcomed me with open arms, a city ready to *"go forward..."*

Back at home in my garden in San Francisco: a brief respite, a busy and growing office to tend to, and much anticipation for the PyeongChang 2018 Winter Games where I'll report from next.

