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**The Disability Dimension of the New European Bauhaus:
The 'Soft' Route to Embedding Accessibility
for Persons with Disabilities in the European Green Deal***

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The Disability Dimension of the New European Bauhaus: The ‘Soft’ Route to Embedding Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in the European Green Deal

Delia Ferri and Alessia Palladino*

Abstract

Adopted in 2021 under the banner of the European Green Deal (EDG), the New European Bauhaus (NEB) is an initiative aimed at implementing the green transition within the built environment. In particular, the NEB provides a framework for collaboration and funding for projects that are ‘sustainable, beautiful and inclusive’. While somewhat overlooked within the ongoing legal debate on the EDG because of its soft and multifaceted nature, the NEB has been a significant facet of EU sustainability policies. This paper contends that the NEB has also proven important in the promotion of disability rights and presents some of the interim findings of a strand of research conducted within the project ‘Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths - DANCING’, funded by the European Research Council (ERC). This paper particularly posits that the NEB has fostered access to the built environment and implemented the wide-ranging accessibility obligations stemming from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Additionally, the NEB presents a highly participatory nature, which maximizes inclusion of persons with disabilities in design and building processes. In that connection, it embeds the participatory principle that underpins the CRPD. Further, this paper highlights the inherent link between accessibility and sustainability in EU policies.

Keywords

New European Bauhaus; NEB; CRPD; disability; accessibility; sustainability; EU; European Green Deal.

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The Disability Dimension of the New European Bauhaus: The ‘Soft’ Route to Embedding Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities in the European Green Deal

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1. Introduction

Since the Lisbon Treaty,¹ sustainable development has become part of the constitutional fabric of the European Union (EU). Article 3 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU) commits the EU to ‘work for the sustainable development of Europe based on balanced economic growth’. This reference tallies with the commitment, stemming from the same provision, to the protection of the environment.² Sustainability has also become a ‘buzz word’ in EU policy making.³ As noted by Dyrhaug and Kurze, the EU’s pledge towards sustainability is visible ‘in various EU policies, standards and multilateral agreements concerning not only environmental policy but many other policy areas which affect the EU’s transition to a low-carbon society’.⁴

Notably, EU law has embraced the concept of sustainable development, as originally expounded in 1987 by the Brundtland Report,⁵ hinting to a development that strives to ‘meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their

¹ Treaty of Lisbon amending the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, 2007/C 306/01.

² Article 3 (3) TEU specifies that the EU should aim at ‘a high level of protection and improvement of the quality of the environment’.

³ Helene Dyrhaug, and Kristina Kurze, *Making the European Green Deal Work: EU Sustainability Policies at Home and Abroad* (New York: Routledge, 2024). See also Trond Ove Tøllefsen, “Sustainability as a ‘Magic Concept,’” *Cuadernos Europeos De Deusto* 64, (2021): 29-52.

⁴ Dyrhaug and Kurze, *Making the European Green Deal Work: EU Sustainability Policies at Home and Abroad*.

⁵ UN Secretary General, World Commission on Environment and Development, “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: ‘Our Common Future’” (Brundtland Report), A/42/427 (1987).

own needs'.⁶ The Brundtland Report identified three pillars of sustainability: social equity, economic growth and environmental protection.⁷ These three pillars of sustainability are those characterising the Sustainable Development Goals⁸ and are embedded in the European Green Deal (EGD),⁹ which is the current and most significant EU umbrella policy on sustainability.

Launched by President von der Leyen in 2019, the EGD traces a roadmap to make the EU economy and society carbon neutral by 2050.¹⁰ Defined by the Commission as the 'lifeline out of the COVID-19 pandemic',¹¹ the EGD aims to implement an economic growth that is decoupled from resource use and to reach the goal of no greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.¹² While the EGD has been harshly criticised from multiple standpoints,¹³ it remains (at least in principle) at the forefront of the EU sustainability ambitions.¹⁴ To achieve the array of goals set by the EGD, the EU has deployed a plethora of different legal instruments and tools which span from legislation on emissions and climate neutrality¹⁵ to the new Social Climate Fund,¹⁶ from the REPowerEU on boosting renewable energy¹⁷ to the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD).¹⁸ Among these diverse and multifarious tools, the New European Bauhaus (NEB) is an EU initiative that aims to rethink and transform the built environment, as well as to address environmental and social challenges.¹⁹

⁶ *Ibid.* 24.

⁷ On the pillars of sustainability, see Ben Purvis, Yong Mao, and Darren Robinson, "Three pillars of sustainability: in search of conceptual origins," *Sustain Sci* 14, (2019): 681–695. See also Brundtland Report: 51.

⁸ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 September 2015, "Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," A/RES/70/1 (2015).

⁹ Commission, 'The European Green Deal' (Communication) COM(2019) 640 final.

¹⁰ Simone Borghesi, and Sergio Vergalli, "The European Green Deal, Energy Transition and Decarbonization," *Environmental Resource Economics* 83, (2022).

¹¹ Commission, 'The European Green Deal' (Communication) COM(2019) 640 final.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See e.g. critical take from Diana Vela Almeida, et al., "The 'Greening' of Empire: The European Green Deal as the EU first agenda," *Political Geography* 105 (2023). See also Markus Kollberg et al., "Green but cautious. How preferences on European integration shape public opinion on the European Green Deal," *Journal of European Public Policy* 105 (2025).

¹⁴ Annette Bongardt, and Francisco Torres, "The European Green Deal: More than an Exit Strategy to the Pandemic Crisis, a Building Block of a Sustainable European Economic Model," *Journal of Common Market Studies* 60, No. 1 (2022).

¹⁵ See among others Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 2021/1119 establishing the framework for achieving climate neutrality and amending Regulations (EC) No 401/2009 and (EU) 2018/1999 ('European Climate Law') [2021] OJ L243/9.

¹⁶ Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 2023/955 establishing a Social Climate Fund and amending Regulation (EU) 2021/1060 [2023] L 130/16.

¹⁷ Commission, 'REPowerEU Plan' (Communication) COM/2022/230 final.

¹⁸ Parliament and Council Directive (EU) 2022/2464 amending Regulation (EU) No 537/2014, Directive 2004/109/EC, Directive 2006/43/EC and Directive 2013/34/EU, as regards corporate sustainability reporting [2022] OJ L 322/15.

¹⁹ European Union, "[New European Bauhaus: beautiful, sustainable, together.](#)" [Accessed 20 August 2025].

The NEB was introduced in 2021 by means of a dedicated Commission Communication (hereafter ‘NEB Communication’).²⁰ It was intended to promote sustainable, inclusive and beautiful solutions in the built environment, integrating ‘sustainability with social inclusion and with aesthetics, and other elements of the quality of experience’.²¹ The NEB is somewhat hazy in its legal contours. Such fuzziness is well epitomised by the Commission’s definition that qualifies the NEB as ‘a project of hope and perspectives’, a project that produces ‘a meeting space to design future ways of living’, located at the crossroads of art, culture, social inclusion, science, and technology. Given the limited EU competence on spatial planning, a soft law initiative such as the NEB was deemed an important catalyst to nudge Member States towards achieving sustainability goals in the built environment. It complements bespoke legislation on specific issues such as the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive,²² which is also deemed to ‘contribute to delivering on the New European Bauhaus initiative’.²³ However, the NEB is ‘transversal by nature and transdisciplinary by design’ and situates at the intersection of an array of EU policies and fields (shared and supporting) competences, such as social policy, transport, energy, environment,²⁴ and culture.²⁵

As yet, several academics from different fields have discussed the NEB’s implication or ambitions, with, for example, Rosado-García *et al* theorising the NEB as ‘an ecosystem of innovation’.²⁶ Other scholars have dealt with distinct exemplary projects within the NEB framework.²⁷ However, the NEB has attracted almost no attention among legal scholars, possibly because of its soft and fuzzy nature. Even less attention to the NEB has been paid by disability lawyers, although the NEB Communication does mention people with disabilities among disadvantaged groups to be included in the built environment. In that connection, the Annex to the NEB Communication overtly links the NEB to the EU Strategy for the Rights of

²⁰ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Parliament and Council Directive (EU) 2024/1275 on the energy performance of buildings [2024] OJ L 2024/1275.

²³ *Ibid.* Preamble para. 3.

²⁴ Article 4 Consolidated Version of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU) [2024] OJ C 202.

²⁵ Article 6 TFEU.

²⁶ María Jesús Rosado-García, et al., “A New European Bauhaus for a Culture of Transversality and Sustainability,” *Sustainability* 13 No. 21, (2021).

²⁷ Alessandro Deserti, and Emma Puerari, *Experimenting with the New European Bauhaus Values and Principles in Urban Transformation* (Cham: Springer, 2025).

Persons with Disabilities 2021–2030 (Strategy 2021–2030).²⁸ On the other hand, the Strategy 2021–2030 also vows to support ‘the green and digital transitions and a healthy Europe’ and the goals of the EGD.²⁹ Additionally, under the accessibility banner, the Strategy 2021–2030 indicates that ‘[t]o make Europe barrier-free, Member States should mainstream accessibility into all relevant policies and actions, notably those related to the [EGD], the Renovation Wave and the New European Bauhaus, and professionals should receive training in accessibility’.³⁰

Against this background, this paper aims to fill a gap in the EU disability law literature and discusses the ‘disability dimension’ of the NEB. In doing so it presents some of the interim findings of a strand of research conducted within the remit of project ‘Protecting the Right to Culture of Persons with Disabilities and Enhancing Cultural Diversity through European Union Law: Exploring New Paths - DANCING’, funded by the European Research Council (ERC). It interrogates the role of the NEB as a springboard to implement accessibility obligations stemming from the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD or Convention), which the EU has ratified alongside its Member States.³¹ On the whole it argues that the NEB, while being soft law, is an important instrument to promote disability rights and compliance to the principles of accessibility and participation of the CRPD. Further, this paper contends that the NEB firmly situates accessibility for persons with disabilities as a key element of sustainability. In that regard, admittedly, accessibility also features in key EU legislation on climate. For example, accessibility is a mandatory obligation for charging stations of electric vehicles as per the Alternative Fuels Infrastructure Regulation,³² and accessibility provisions are also included in the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.³³ More generic disability references are included the Social Climate Fund and Just Transition Fund³⁴ to ensure that those most affected by the transition are supported and to fight what has been termed ‘energy poverty’. However, the NEB seems to go beyond these sporadic references to accessibility and fully embed CRPD principles into its approach to sustainability.

²⁸ Commission, ‘Union of Equality Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021 – 2030’ COM(2021) 101 final.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Council Decision 2010/48 concerning the conclusion, by the European Community, of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [2010] OJ L23/35.

³² Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 2023/1804 on the deployment of alternative fuels infrastructure, and repealing Directive 2014/94/EU [2023] OJ L234/1.

³³ See Parliament and Council Directive (EU) 2024/1275 on the energy performance of buildings [2024] OJ L 2024/1275, specifically Articles 6, 7, 8 and 29.

³⁴ Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 2021/1056 establishing the Just Transition Fund [2021] OJ L 231/1.

After these introductory remarks, the second section provides an overview of EU obligations under the CRPD with a focus on accessibility and participation which are key for this analysis. The third section outlines the core tenets of the NEB and expound its values, its key principles, thematic axes and funding streams, laying the foundation for the discussion of the disability dimension of the NEB carried out in the fourth section. The fifth and concluding section reflects on the overall role of the NEB in fostering disability rights and in entrenching accessibility in EU sustainability policies.

2. Accessibility as a Cornerstone of Disability Rights

The CRPD, having been ratified by the EU alongside its Member States, has become integral part of EU law and situates below the Treaties and above EU legislation. The EU must implement the Convention and fulfil its obligations, and all EU legislation and policies should be interpreted and applied in a manner compliant to the CRPD.³⁵ Given the key role of the CRPD in the EU legal order, this section - building on the wealth of literature on the Convention³⁶ - focuses on accessibility and participation as key principles as well as considers how participation links to accessibility to foreground the subsequent analysis.

2.1. The CRPD

Being consistently heralded as a watershed in the advancement of disability rights,³⁷ the CRPD embeds a paradigm shift in the way in which it constitutes disability. It embraces a social-contextual understanding of disability,³⁸ highlighting that disability spurs from the interaction between individual impairments and external barriers.³⁹ The key principles of the CRPD include those of dignity, autonomy, non-discrimination, equality, accessibility and participation.

³⁵ Joined Cases C-335/11 and C-337/11 *HK Danmark* [2022] ECLI:EU:CC:2013:222, para. 32.

³⁶ Among many others, see Rosemary Kayess, and Philip French, “Out of Darkness into Light? Introducing the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” *Human Rights Law Review* 8, No. 1 (2008); Paul Harpur, “Embracing the New Disability Rights Paradigm: The Importance of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” *Disability and Society* 27, No. 1 (2012); Arlene Kanter, “The Promise and Challenge of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,” *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce* 34 (2007); and Gauthier De Beco, *Disability in International Human Rights Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁷ Gerard Quinn, “Resisting The ‘Temptation Of Elegance’: Can the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Socialise States to Right Behaviour?” in Oddný Mjöll Arnardóttir, and Gerard Quinn (eds), *The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. European and Scandinavian perspectives* (Leiden: Brill Nijhoff, 2009).

³⁸ Andrea Broderick, and Delia Ferri, *International and European Disability Law and Policy. Text, Cases and Materials*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

³⁹ Article 1(2) CRPD.

These principles are listed in Article 3 CRPD, but traverse and inform all provisions of the Convention. Scholarship has generally emphasised that the CRPD rewrites all civil and political rights, as well as economic, social and cultural rights through the lens of disability.⁴⁰ In doing so, it requires States Parties to address barriers and structural disadvantages faced by persons with disabilities, as well as to combat negative attitudes against them. The CRPD sets out an array of obligations that Parties to the Convention have to accomplish in order to create an enabling environment whereby persons with disabilities can fully participate in society. However, as Bartlett most recently noted, the CRPD articulates rights differently, so that ‘they are instead about how society more broadly understands and engages with people with disabilities and indeed how people with disabilities understand themselves’.⁴¹ Further as Bartlett put it, ‘[t]hose implementing the CRPD will not just be policymakers and legislators, but professionals in communities, families and people caring informally for friends and loved ones, and indeed everyone in society’.⁴² In this respect, Watson notes that the CRPD ‘exhibits a social inclusion trigger, catalysing society to engage with marginalized groups and engage in inclusive development’.⁴³

The CRPD has also established the CRPD Committee and entrusted it with giving authoritative interpretations of the Convention and monitoring its implementation. The CRPD Committee performs this duty on foot of Article 34 CRPD. The EU has already undergone two periodic monitoring periods with Concluding Observations (COs) on the second and third periodic report released earlier this year, in March 2025.⁴⁴

2.2. Accessibility in the CRPD

In line with this social-contextual model, the CRPD recognises ‘the importance of accessibility to the physical, social, economic and cultural environment, to health and education and to information and communication, in enabling persons with disabilities to fully enjoy all

⁴⁰ Frédéric Mégret, “The Disabilities Convention: Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities or Disability Rights?,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, No. 2 (2008).

⁴¹ Peter Bartlett, “Beyond the liberal subject: challenges in interpreting the CRPD, and the CRPD’s challenges to human rights,” *Human Rights Law Review* 25, No. 2 (2025).

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Danielle Watson, “The CRPD is Here and queer! A lesson in queering human rights law,” *Human Rights Law Review* 25, No. 2 (2025).

⁴⁴ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of the European Union” CRPD/C/EU/CO/2-3 (2025).

human rights and fundamental freedoms’.⁴⁵ Accessibility is provided for in Article 9 CRPD, which requires States Parties to ‘take appropriate measures to ensure to persons with disabilities access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, to transportation, to information and communications, including information and communications technologies and systems, and to other facilities and services open or provided to the public, both in urban and in rural areas’. To that end States Parties must ‘take appropriate measures’ *inter alia* to ‘develop, promulgate and monitor the implementation of minimum standards and guidelines for the accessibility of facilities and services open or provided to the public’, ‘[p]rovide training for stakeholders on accessibility issues facing persons with disabilities’, ‘[p]rovide in buildings and other facilities open to the public signage in Braille and in easy to read and understand forms’ and ‘[p]rovide forms of live assistance and intermediaries, including guides, readers and professional sign language interpreters, to facilitate accessibility to buildings and other facilities open to the public’.⁴⁶ Article 21 CRPD constitutes accessibility of information as a bedrock to the right to freedom of expression. Further, accessibility obligations are included in several other provisions, such as among others, Articles 20 (on free movement), 24 (on the right to education), 27 (on the right to work), 30 (on the right to participate in culture).

The CRPD includes accessibility among its general principles, but does not proffer definitive guidance regarding whether accessibility is a principle or a human right *per se*.⁴⁷ The CRPD Committee in its General Comment No. 2,⁴⁸ rather than defining the legal nature of accessibility, qualifies it as a ‘precondition’ for the enjoyment of all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights’.⁴⁹ It also lists the fields in which accessibility must be implemented, recalling more or less *verbatim* the content of Article 9.⁵⁰ However, scholars have endeavoured to expound the meaning of accessibility and ensuing obligations. Particularly, Charitakis espoused that in the CRPD accessibility comprises five different aspects: attitudinal accessibility, economic accessibility or affordability, physical accessibility, information accessibility and communication accessibility.⁵¹ Attitudinal accessibility lies in the removal of

⁴⁵ CRPD Preamble, Point (v).

⁴⁶ Article 9(2) CRPD.

⁴⁷ Andrea Broderick, “Of rights and obligations: the birth of accessibility,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 24, No. 4 (2020).

⁴⁸ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “General comment No. 2 Article 9: Accessibility” CRPD/C/GC/2 (2014).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 25.

stigma and discriminatory behaviour.⁵² Economic accessibility entails the making of goods and services affordable to persons with disabilities. This dimension of accessibility connects to structural poverty faced by persons with disabilities, who ‘tend to earn lower wages, to face additional costs related to disability and to lack access to financial services’.⁵³ The physical dimension of accessibility concerns the interrelation with the external environment,⁵⁴ and is the most relevant in relation to the matter discussed here. Physical accessibility is rather complex *per se* because it requires the actual availability of accessible goods, services and facilities and their usability. Information accessibility requires that general information about facilities, goods and services as well as about accessibility itself are available and accessible to all.⁵⁵ This dimension is interlinked with communication accessibility, which directly concerns making information available in alternative modes and means of communication.⁵⁶

2.3. Accessibility and Independent Living

Accessibility is key to realise Article 19 CRPD which provides the right to live independently and be included in the community. The CRPD Committee stresses that persons with disabilities must have control over their lives, and accessibility of private and public spaces is essential to allow them to live the way they want to live.⁵⁷ Article 19 CRPD covers *inter alia* access to safe and adequate housing, individual services and community facilities. According to the CRPD Committee, ‘accessible housing providing accommodation to persons with disabilities, whether they live alone or as a part of a family, must be available in sufficient number, within all areas of the community, to provide the right of persons with disabilities to choose and the possibility to do so’.⁵⁸ To this end, ‘barrier-free new residential construction and the barrier-free retrofitting of existing residential structures are required’.⁵⁹ In that regard,

⁵² Charitakis, *Access denied: The Role of the European Union in Ensuring Accessibility under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, p. 25.

⁵³ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Disability and development report 2024: Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities* (New York: United Nations, 2024).

⁵⁴ Charitakis, *Access denied: The Role of the European Union in Ensuring Accessibility under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

⁵⁵ Charitakis, *Access denied: The Role of the European Union in Ensuring Accessibility under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “General comment No. 5 on Article 19: the right to live independently and be included in the community” CRPD/C/GC/5 (2017): para 2.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* para 34.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* para 34.

Article 19 tallies with Article 28 CRPD which focuses on the right of persons with disabilities to an adequate standard of living for themselves and their families, ‘including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions’. Besides recognising the right of persons with disabilities to social protection, this provision requires States Parties to ensure access by persons with disabilities to public housing programmes.

2.4. Participation in the CRPD

Participation is also listed as a general principle in Article 3(c) of the CRPD, and provided for, among others, in Articles 4(3) and 33(3). The former provision requires that ‘[i]n the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision-making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organizations’, while the latter states that ‘[c]ivil society, in particular persons with disabilities and their representative organizations, shall be involved and participate fully in the monitoring process’. The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights specifies that ‘participation goes beyond consultation and includes meaningful involvement in activities and decision-making processes, the possibility to voice opinions, to influence and to complain when participation is denied’.⁶⁰

Participation builds on the rights-based approach that the CRPD purports, and tallies with principles like independence, personal autonomy and dignity. Participation is also linked to accessibility. On the one hand, accessibility, by dismantling barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from being included in society, is an enabler of participation. On the other hand, and by the same token, participation is necessary to ensure accessibility in that expertise and lived experience of persons with disabilities can inform how accessibility is realised. The ‘procedural’ part of accessibility is hence participatory by very nature⁶¹ in that to make services, facilities, goods and services accessible, persons with disabilities must be consulted and involved in the design and deployment stages.⁶² In this respect, participation of persons with

⁶⁰ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Training Guide – Professional Training Series No.19” HR/P/PT/19 (2014): 15.

⁶¹ Ferri, “Advancing an Embodied Understanding of Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities”.

⁶² Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, “General comment No. 2 Article 9: Accessibility” CRPD/C/GC/2 (2014): para. 19.

disabilities in the decisions that concern accessibility is required on foot of Article 4(3) CRPD, and is vital to ensure that accessibility solutions are appropriate and effective in removing barriers.

3. The New European Bauhaus

After having briefly outlined accessibility obligations within the CRPD and their link to participation, this section provides a general examination of the NEB, before turning to its disability dimension.

3.1. The NEB as Piece of the European Green Deal Jigsaw

The EGD, as noted above, is the flagship EU initiative to fight climate change. It is far reaching as it comprises a number of strategies, policies and legislative acts that, collectively, are intended to reach climate neutrality and support a just, sustainable and inclusive transformation of European economy. As mentioned earlier, the NEB was launched in 2021, as part of the EGD, by the European Commission through the NEB Communication.⁶³ Since 2021, several documents have been issued to explain and clarify its scope and functioning, and to give practical guidance to stakeholders. Among those, the NEB Compass provides guidelines for the application of the NEB's principles and values,⁶⁴ while the NEB Toolbox presents tools for planning and designing NEB projects.⁶⁵ The NEB Investment Guidelines further lay out how to align investments in the built environment with the NEB values and principles,⁶⁶ and are complemented by the NEB Practical Guide, which offers an overview of the NEB self-assessment method, designed to implement the NEB values and principles in practical projects.⁶⁷

The NEB owes its name to the Bauhaus movement, a German arts and crafts school which developed in the first half of the 20th century.⁶⁸ It is defined as a 'policy and funding

⁶³ European Union, "[New European Bauhaus: beautiful, sustainable, together.](#)" [Accessed 20 August 2025].

⁶⁴ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Compass: A guiding framework for decision and project makers wishing to apply the NEB principles and criteria to their activities." (2022).

⁶⁵ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Toolbox" (2024).

⁶⁶ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines" (2024).

⁶⁷ P. B. Lourenço, et al., *A practical guide to the New European Bauhaus self-assessment method and tool* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2024).

⁶⁸ Kajetan Sadowski, "Implementation of the New European Bauhaus Principles as a context for teaching sustainable architecture," *Sustainability* 13, No. 19 (2021).

initiative that makes green transition in built environments and beyond enjoyable, attractive and convenient for all'.⁶⁹ As Peragine and Fardin put it, 'the NEB mainly focuses on the architectural and urban dimensions of a sustainable Europe' and gives 'a spatial form to the policies elaborated by' the EGD.⁷⁰ The NEB acknowledges that buildings that have not been adapted to recent efficiency-led energy requirements 'are responsible for a significant portion of global energy consumption and Green House Gas (GHG) emissions'.⁷¹ In that regard, the goal of the NEB is to 'find sustainable solutions for transforming the built environment and lifestyle',⁷² but, in doing that, the NEB also aims to make the built environment inclusive. In practical terms, the NEB aims to steer Member States towards achieving a green transformation that 'is people-centric, putting societal needs first'.⁷³

On the whole the NEB encompasses an array of rather diverse endeavours, research projects, exchanges of best practices, building and restoration projects and other initiatives that relate to the built environment broadly conceived, spanning from museum renovations, event focused on the sustainable management of European forests, exhibitions, or fairs. The NEB also encompasses promotion initiatives such as the NEB Prizes that celebrate inspirational projects embodying NEB values.

3.2. The NEB Values, Core Principles and Thematic Axes

The NEB and is informed by three core values: aesthetic, sustainability and inclusion. Aesthetic alludes to the need to combine functionality and sense of beauty,⁷⁴ in line with the historical Bauhaus, from which the NEB draws inspiration.⁷⁵ Sustainability encompasses the environmental goals of the NEB. The third and last core value is inclusion, which refers to the need to granting and securing equal access for all, while encouraging exchanges between different cultures. Inclusion embraces affordability and accessibility while valorising diversity

⁶⁹ European Union, "[New European Bauhaus: beautiful, sustainable, together.](#)" [Accessed 20 August 2025].

⁷⁰ Richard Lee Peragine, and J. Igor Fardin, "From Keywords to Use: The New European Bauhaus, Language, and Ethics in Architecture," *Architectural Theory Review* 29, No. 1 (2025).

⁷¹ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines" (2024): 53. On the contribution of the built environment to GHG emissions see also New European Bauhaus, "Roadmap for the New European Bauhaus Facility" (2025): 5.

⁷² European Union, "[New European Bauhaus: beautiful, sustainable, together.](#)" [Accessed 20 August 2025].

⁷³ Commission, 'NEB Facility Scoping Document' (Decision) C(2025) 2779 (2025).

⁷⁴ Sadowski, "Implementation of the New European Bauhaus Principles as a context for teaching sustainable architecture".

⁷⁵ Przemyslaw Nowakowski, "Beauty and Utility in Architecture, Interior Design and in the New European Bauhaus Concepts," *Buildings* 14, No. 4 (2024).

and equality for all.⁷⁶ The three core values are integrated in the NEB activities and serve as guidelines for the functioning of the NEB itself.

The NEB is guided by three key (operational/working) principles that are the result of a co-creation process.⁷⁷ The first key principle is a ‘multi-level approach’, which requires account be given to global and local perspectives. The second one is a ‘participatory approach’ which emphasizes the role played by civil society.⁷⁸ It acknowledges that collective thinking is key for creative solutions. In that regard, Rosado-Garcia *et al.* place emphasis on the three phases – ‘Design, Deliver and Diffuse’ - of the NEB.⁷⁹ They view the NEB in the ‘design’ phase as an ‘incubator’, i.e. a forum for discussion and experimentation at the ‘niche’ level, while in the ‘deliver’ phase, it will be an ‘accelerator’, scaling up solutions for sustainable and attractive living.⁸⁰ They also qualify the ‘diffuse’ phase as one in which the NEB will become ‘a hub for global networks and specialists, and also for citizens’.⁸¹ As it will be discussed later, from a disability perspective, this key principle of the NEB supports a new form of architectural design which includes users with disabilities from the initial phase and can be conceived of as implementing the principle of participation included in Article 3 CRPD and the obligations laid out in Article 4(3) CRPD. In this respect it tallies with a participatory dimension of accessibility. The third key principle is about embedding a ‘transdisciplinary approach’ which entails ‘bridging silos between viewpoints and professions’.⁸²

The NEB encompasses four thematic axes which guide the implementation of its goals.⁸³ The axes were developed from the Commission on the basis of the inputs received on the co-design phase,⁸⁴ and include: (a) reconnecting with nature, (b) regaining a sense of belonging, (c) prioritising the places and the people that need it the most and (d) long-term, life-

⁷⁶ New European Bauhaus, “New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines” (2024):14.

⁷⁷ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: Annex II: Mobilising EU Programmes.

⁷⁸ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final. See, on the matter, James Mackie, and Gill Allwood, “The implementation of the 2030 Agenda’s principles of ‘leaving-no one-behind’ and ‘addressing the needs of those furthest behind first’ in the EU’s development policy,” Study requested by the DEVE Committee, Directorate-General for External policies – Policy Department. (2022).

⁷⁹ Rosado-García, et al., “A New European Bauhaus for a Culture of Transversality and Sustainability”.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ New European Bauhaus, “[New European Bauhaus: Commission launches design phase](#)” [Accessed 20 August 2025].

cycle thinking in the industrial ecosystem. The first thematic axe yields the shifting from a human-centred to a life-centred perspective, with different values and behaviours.⁸⁵ The second thematic axe centres on the need to involve local communities, enhancing social interaction and active mobility.⁸⁶ The third thematic axe embeds the inclusion core value and requires the solutions purported within the NEB to be affordable and accessible to everyone, with a specific focus on groups that are systematically discriminated against. Special attention under this thematic axe is also given to the use of accessible designs,⁸⁷ which are to be implemented in the NEB. The last thematic axe links to sustainability and to the implementation of the digital transition, given that digital tools can improve the sustainability performance of the built environment.⁸⁸

3.3. The NEB Legal Facets

Although this working paper does not focus on the NEB legal facets and a discussion of the NEB ‘bindingness’ is out of its scope, it is worth noting that the NEB is a soft law initiative which mostly leverages on supporting collaborative efforts of the Member States to achieve the EGD goals. However, the impact of the NEB goes beyond the non-binding nature of all the documents that complement the NEB Communication and govern this initiative. All those documents display legal and practical effects or have a persuasive force. For example, the NEB Toolbox is the practical resource that guide the design and implementation of NEB projects,⁸⁹ including with regard to accessibility and participation of persons with disabilities, and in it is an instrument that has to be complied with in practice. Most of all a degree of ‘bindingness’ stems from the embedding of NEB bespoke values and principles in tailored criteria for obtaining EU funding. The NEB has availed of an array of funding tools such as NextGeneration EU, European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and Cohesion Fund, Horizon Europe, Erasmus+, LIFE, and the Single Market Programme, among others.⁹⁰ With regard to the ERDF, the NEB connects to the new European Urban Initiative (EUI) that was

⁸⁵ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: 7.

⁸⁶ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: 8. See also New European Bauhaus, “New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines” (2024): 14.

⁸⁷ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: 9.

⁸⁸ New European Bauhaus, “New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines” (2024): 14.

⁸⁹ New European Bauhaus, “New European Bauhaus Toolbox” (2024).

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

established within the urban dimension of Cohesion policy for the 2021-2027 programming period.⁹¹ In fact, the NEB initiative ‘acted as a connector and promoter of the funding mechanisms and policy programmes that already exist’.⁹² In 2024, the funding of the NEB converged into the creation of the NEB Facility, which constitutes a ‘dedicated stand-alone, visible and multiannual funding instrument’ for the NEB, sustaining this initiative in carrying out its action and achieving its goals,⁹³ but will also leverage on different EU programmes, ‘with additional support from national and private funding’.⁹⁴

4. The Disability Dimension of the NEB

The NEB does embrace, while implicitly, the social-contextual understanding of disability. None of the NEB documents – mentioned above in section 3 - admittedly cite Article 1(2) CRPD, yet the NEB recognises environmental and societal barriers that, in interaction with individuals’ impairments, cause disability. This corroborates - and is the latest evidence of - the Europeanisation of the social-contextual concept of disability, which has been discussed elsewhere.⁹⁵ The NEB strong social-contextual disability dimension is epitomised in its emphasis on accessibility and participation. References to accessibility and to persons with disabilities are present in the NEB Communication and in all NEB documents ensuing from it, and trickle down in the criteria to obtain NEB funding. Most importantly, projects realised under the NEB – using the array of funding tools mentioned above in section 3.3. - trigger the collective implementation of the CRPD, evidenced by Bartlett,⁹⁶ placing front and center professionals and communities.

4.1. Accessibility in the NEB: A Comprehensive Approach that Aligns with the CRPD

Accessibility of the built environment is one of the multiple ways through which the NEB pursues its core value of inclusion. The NEB Communication suggests that ‘[b]eautiful

⁹¹ Parliament and Council Regulation (EU) 2021/1058 on the European Regional Development Fund and on the Cohesion Fund [2021] OJ L 231/60: Article 12.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Commission, ‘NEB Facility Scoping Document’ (Decision) C(2025) 2779.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Delia Ferri, and Neža Šubic, “The European Union: Federal Trends in Disability Rights” in Delia Ferri, Francesco Palermo, and Giuseppe Martinico (eds), *Federalism and the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (Oxford: Hart, 2023).

⁹⁶ Bartlett, “Beyond the liberal subject: challenges in interpreting the CRPD, and the CRPD’s challenges to human rights”.

and sustainable solutions have to be affordable and accessible for all'.⁹⁷ In that regard, it also states that '[i]nclusion also implies pursuing a Design for All approach to remove accessibility barriers to the built and virtual environments and to goods and services'.⁹⁸ In line with the CRPD and by referring to the Strategy 2021-2030, the NEB embraces the view that accessibility to the built and virtual environment is a precondition for persons with disabilities to live independently and participate fully in all aspects of life.⁹⁹ The NEB Practical Guide mentions accessibility for persons with disabilities among the general criteria to assess whether a specific project is in line with NEB values and principles.¹⁰⁰ Notably, the Guide defines accessibility as a 'fundamental human right',¹⁰¹ and again refers to the Strategy 2021-2030.¹⁰² Accessibility of the built environment also features among the indicators listed in the Practical Guide.¹⁰³ In fact, many of the NEB projects embed accessibility. For example, the BUGA Wood Pavilion in Germany,¹⁰⁴ a public event area which presents a peculiar wooden roof. This specific installation favours durability, adaptability and recyclability. At the same time, the pavilion is fully accessible as it presents no physical barriers and 'it can be publicly and openly accessed by everybody without distinction of any sort'.¹⁰⁵

While being mostly focused on physical accessibility, in line with the CRPD, the NEB fosters accessibility in its broader and multidimensional meaning recalled above.¹⁰⁶ The NEB Communication places emphasis on affordability (or as Charitakis calls it 'economic accessibility') as key to realising inclusion. The relevance that affordability plays in the NEB speaks directly to economic barriers faced by persons with disabilities who are more likely to

⁹⁷ Commission, 'New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together' (Communication) COM/2021/573 final.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Commission, 'New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together' (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: Annex I: Report on the co-design phase: Section 4.1.

¹⁰⁰ Lourenço, et al., *A practical guide to the New European Bauhaus self-assessment method and tool; New European Bauhaus*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*: 167.

¹⁰² Commission, 'Union of Equality: Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2021-2030' (Communication) COM(2021) 101 final.

¹⁰³ Lourenço, et al., *A practical guide to the New European Bauhaus self-assessment method and tool; New European Bauhaus*: 233.

¹⁰⁴ New European Bauhaus Prizes, "[BUGA Wood Pavilion](#)" [Accessed 20 August 2025].

¹⁰⁵ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Compass: A guiding framework for decision and project makers wishing to apply the NEB principles and criteria to their activities." (2022): 35.

¹⁰⁶ Charitakis, *Access denied: The Role of the European Union in Ensuring Accessibility under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

face poverty.¹⁰⁷ The concept of affordability is, under the NEB, linked overtly to housing,¹⁰⁸ as the Commission itself stressed in its 2nd and 3rd report to the CRPD Committee.¹⁰⁹ In that report, under the implementation of Article 28 CRPD, the Commission asserts to promote accessible housing through *inter alia* the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI), launched in 2021,¹¹⁰ ‘in synergy’ with the NEB.¹¹¹ Furthermore, the Commission recalls that the NEB Compass, which is a guiding framework for project makers wishing to apply the NEB principles and criteria to their activities, ‘states the importance of ensuring accessibility and affordability’.¹¹² It is telling that the Commission highlights that some ‘demonstration projects will test renovation as a lever to address energy poverty and access to healthy housing for all households, including for low-income persons with disabilities’.¹¹³

The NEB also deals with information and communication accessibility, albeit in a more general manner. The NEB Communication stresses generally the importance of digitalisation highlighting that ‘delivering access to digital connectivity to all people is an essential enabler for independent living’.¹¹⁴ The standard EN 17210 is also mentioned as one of the ‘key references’ for assessing the compliance of a specific project with the NEB values and principles.¹¹⁵ In that regard, within different indicators of compliance with EN 17210 are ‘tactile information’, ‘audible information and hearing enhancement’ and ‘signage’.¹¹⁶

Another dimension of accessibility – as identified by Charitakis – that features prominently in the NEB is that of attitudinal accessibility, which is linked to the idea of removal of stigma faced by persons with disabilities. This aspect of accessibility is deeply linked to participation. By including people with disabilities from the very first steps of design processes, as it will be discussed in the following subsection, the NEB can support the dismantling of

¹⁰⁷ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Disability and development report 2024: Accelerating the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals by, for and with persons with disabilities*: 33.

¹⁰⁸ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573 final.

¹⁰⁹ European Union, “Combined 2nd and 3rd periodic reports submitted by the European Union under article 35 of the Convention, due in 2021 : Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” CRPD/C/EU/2-3 (2024).

¹¹⁰ European Commission, “[Affordable Housing Initiative](#)” [Accessed 20 August 2025].

¹¹¹ European Union, “Combined 2nd and 3rd periodic reports submitted by the European Union under article 35 of the Convention, due in 2021 : Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities” CRPD/C/EU/2-3 (2024): 30.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*: Para 225.

¹¹⁴ Commission, ‘New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together’ (Communication) COM/2021/573.

¹¹⁵ New European Bauhaus, “New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines” (2024).

¹¹⁶ Lourenço, et al., *A practical guide to the New European Bauhaus self-assessment method and tool; New European Bauhaus*: 237-238.

stereotypes and help combatting stigma. the NEB Investment Guidelines also underline how the inclusion core value is deeply linked to avoidance of discrimination.¹¹⁷

4.2. Participation as Cornerstone of the NEB

The development of the NEB occurred through a participatory process from which specific themes and principles emerged. Beauty itself as characterisation of the built environment is considered to stem from processes in which citizens and various stakeholders continuously interact and participate.¹¹⁸ According to Puerari and Deserti '[b]y recognizing this collective character of beauty, the NEB encourages embracing this notion of "spontaneity" to move beyond design models that follow fixed aesthetics paradigms towards urban environments that reflect both community engagement and emergence'.¹¹⁹ The NEB Compass states that NEB projects should embrace a participatory process, which highlight the importance of involving the final users of new designs in every phase of the creation.

In line with Article 4(3) CRPD persons with disabilities were among those that participated in the co-design phase that led to the establishment of the NEB.¹²⁰ Consistent with this approach persons with disabilities have to be (and have been) involved in NEB projects. Puerari and Deserti highlight that co-creation 'empowers participants as active contributors'.¹²¹ Such shift from 'mere consultation to collective action and self-governance'¹²² responds to the ethos of the whole CRPD, to its rights-based approach to disability. The case of '*L'Orto della SME*', a small garden located in a neglected and polluted space within the premises of the School of Management and Economics (SME) of the University of Turin, is one of the projects that embeds accessibility and involved persons with disabilities from the beginning of the project.¹²³ The Multisensory Museum (in the Netherlands) is also one of the exemplary projects that are listed in the NEB Compass to highlight a co-design process that that engaged 'people

¹¹⁷ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Investment Guidelines" (2024): 176.

¹¹⁸ Emma Puerari, and Alessandro Deserti, "Supporting Transformation in Urban Areas: The Desire Project" in Alessandro Deserti, and Emma Puerari (eds), *Experimenting with the New European Bauhaus Values and Principles in Urban Transformation* (Cham: Springer, 2025).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Commission, 'New European Bauhaus Beautiful, Sustainable, Together' (Communication) COM/2021/573 final: 6.

¹²¹ Puerari, and Deserti, "Supporting Transformation in Urban Areas: The Desire Project".

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Daniel Torchia, et al., "New European Bauhaus for a Circular Economy and Waste Management: The Lived Experience of a Community Container Garden at the University of Turin" *Sustainability* 15, No. 2 (2023).

with disability and architects together in a creative endeavour'.¹²⁴ In this project, participation of persons with disabilities has proven essential to dismantling barriers that prevent individuals with disabilities from being included in the museum and to ensure accessibility. In turn such museum, by being experienced through all the senses (sound, touch, smell, vision, motion), gives 'an architectural expression to inclusion and dialogue', and fosters equitable participation of persons with disabilities in culture, as required by the CRPD.

5. Concluding Remarks

As yet, the NEB has functioned as a catalyst for the implementation of Article 9 CRPD in relation to the physical environment, as well as of disability rights that directly connects to that principle, including, as the Commission itself underlined, Article 28 CRPD,¹²⁵ and Article 19 CRPD. The use of EU funding to deploy NEB projects in a participatory way has certainly implemented Article 4(3) CRPD and more generally the principle of participation.

It is probably still early to measure the success of the NEB in terms of enhancing accessibility and participatory approaches in architectural and urban design, but the extent and variety of projects funded so far seems to lend to the conclusion that it can be very effective in practice. On the whole, the NEB is possibly the latest confirmation of the importance of soft instruments that leverage on collaborative efforts and EU funding in the EU implementation of the CRPD.¹²⁶ It is also the latest evidence that the EU can spur Member States' efforts towards an alignment with the Convention's principle of accessibility even in area where its competence is limited such as the built environment and spatial planning.

Most interestingly, however, the NEB contributes to shape the normative concept of sustainability in EU law. In this respect, while accessibility clauses as noted above feature in some of pieces of legislation related to the improvement of energy efficiency in the built environment, the NEB has the merit to go beyond the idea of accessibility as 'side issue' or complementary obligation in making the building environment sustainable. In fact, the NEB fully embeds accessibility as core component of social facet of sustainability, and makes

¹²⁴ New European Bauhaus, "New European Bauhaus Compass: A guiding framework for decision and project makers wishing to apply the NEB principles and criteria to their activities." (2022): 8.

¹²⁵ European Union, "Combined 2nd and 3rd periodic reports submitted by the European Union under article 35 of the Convention, due in 2021 : Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities" CRPD/C/EU/2-3 (2024).

¹²⁶ Delia Ferri, "The role of soft law in advancing the rights of persons with disabilities in the EU: A 'hybridity' approach to EU disability law," *European Law Journal* 28, No. 4-6 (2022).

accessibility a core criterion to obtain EU funding that support sustainable development. Further, the NEB makes evident that fostering the creation of buildings that embed accessibility in their design is essential to ensure sustainability. If the built environment is accessible, then it is also more environmentally sustainable, not only because it is inclusive of a wide range of users, but also because later adaptations will be unnecessary, avoiding overuse of resources. Accessible buildings are expected to meet future needs, whereby the number of persons with disabilities is expected to grow in line with population growth trends and ageing.¹²⁷ In that regard, the NEB is also maximising building efficiency. Furthermore, the NEB supports a participatory approach as core to sustainability, and EU funding has been key to deploy and scale up participatory practices. Small projects such as *Orto della SME* or the Multisensory Museum involved people with disabilities from the design phase and their accessibility is the result of such participatory processes.

All in all, the NEB has an important disability dimension and a great potential to implement the CRPD, in spite of its fuzzy legal nature. While this working paper has only highlighted some interim findings of the research, the NEB role in fostering disability rights and in catalysing the use of EU funding towards the realisation of accessibility of the built environment is a matter for further research.

¹²⁷ World Health Organisation, “[Disability](#)” [Accessed 20 August 2025].