Grant as a Driving Force for Innovation in Universal Design

Tina Therese LARSEN and Torben BLINDHEIM
The Norwegian State Housing Bank, Norway

Abstract. This paper highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity for innovation and change in the work of Universal Design in housing. It puts particular emphasis on a grant provided by the Norwegian State Housing Bank (NSHB).

Keywords. Innovation, Universal Design, housing, grant, collaboration

1. Introduction

This paper highlights the importance of interdisciplinarity for innovation and change in the work of Universal Design (UD) in housing. It puts particular emphasis on a grant provided by the Norwegian State Housing Bank (NSHB). The purpose of the grant is research and development for the promotion of quality in building design. Historically, interest groups and other specialized agencies have driven much of the development in universal design, which has resulted in a narrow focus that often leads to specialized solutions. This article argues that innovation in UD is created through a holistic approach, where different disciplines and sectors are being urged to collaborate on finding better solutions. The following will show why and how the grant for development projects on UD can be a driving force for innovation.

2. Background – Financial Instruments for Universal Design

The Norwegian State Housing Bank is the main agency implementing Norwegian housing policy on a national level. The primary aim of the Norwegian housing policy is to supply adequate and secure housing for all. Many people need support in order to find and retain adequate housing. This is the case for both individuals with special needs as well as those who experience financial difficulties in entering the housing market. NSHB also work closely with local authorities and the private sector to improve the quality of housing in the housing market. In particular, the promotion of UD in the housing and building sectors is emphasized.
In order to fulfill the primary aims of the Norwegian housing policy, the NSHB provides loans, grants and guidance as well as initiating new development and research. The grant for research and development is our main instrument for initiating new development in the area of UD. Each year the NSHB assigns grants towards development projects for UD in housing, outdoor areas and other built environments. The grant aims to be a driving force for development and use of new solutions and methods in the housing and building sector. The Norwegian government allocates the funds, and has awarded about 10 million Norwegian kroner to projects for UD each year since 2011, and a smaller amount the years before.

3. The Norwegian State Housing Bank’s Approach to Universal Design

The NSHB is working towards increasing the amount of housing with UD qualities. We regard universal design as a method for creating a more inclusive society. The concept of UD is to ensure that the design practices provide good access and usability for all, rather than making special adjustments for certain groups [1].

In order to get a loan from the NSHB, you must meet certain quality criteria for UD in housing, formulated through minimum requirements in building regulations and standards. Minimum standards risk limiting the maximum effort in finding solutions for UD. The grant seeks to expand this way of thinking: UD requires integration as a process within the sustainable design framework and mainstream design thinking. The grant for research and development aims to provide new methods that challenges and improves regulations. UD of our environment is a value-based design strategy, an attitude towards architecture and a way of thinking, a way of talking about things and a way of building.

4. Why and How the Grant Is a Driving Force for Innovation?

Agency for Public Management and eGovernment in Norway (Difi) defines innovation as “renewing or creating something new that creates value for organizations, communities or the residents. The shape is experimental, and the solution is not known in advance” [2]. Developing the right solution for the users requires the right professionals, cooperation between collaborators in different ways affected by, or involved in, the solution and a willingness to take risks.

The grant for research and development has led to new forms of collaboration between different disciplines and public-private actors. Students, architects, disability organizations now all work together to find the best solutions for all, whereas the grant formerly was more dedicated to certain groups, i.e. various disability organizations and specialized interest groups. Based on our experiences with managing the grant we will highlight three factors that show how the grant has contributed to innovations in UD.

4.1 Municipalities and Professionals in Research Mode

Asplan Viak’s evaluation from 2009 [3] shows that the grant for research and development is an important instrument in relation to the development of the national housing policy in Norway, and important in order to trigger development in
municipalities and among other actors within the field of UD [3]. The NSHB has experienced that the grant enables professionals to engage with new knowledge and to look for new solutions. Employees in municipalities are given the opportunity to pursue development beyond the daily tasks, and this can bring new perspectives and solutions in dealing with universal design. A consistent finding in the evaluation [3] is that the grant is considered highly valuable in the realization of targets that would not otherwise have been prioritized within the political housing and building theme.

4.2 Vitalize and Inspire through “Learning Agents”

The grant for research and development has helped to rejuvenate and inspire actors in the field of UD. The NSHB name these actors as “learning agents”. The learning agent is one who acknowledges the value of UD, takes ownership of the knowledge and relays this to their partners and to their fellows. This concerns both acquiring new knowledge and spreading it to new stakeholders. Recipients of the grant have a duty to share their knowledge, in order that it can best be of inspiration to others.

4.3 Innovation through Interdisciplinarity

When evaluating the grant for research and development [3], the respondents stated that networking and collaboration are important elements in the projects. New collaboration occurs, different disciplines meet, new ideas and solutions are realized, and knowledge is shared. In this perspective, the interdisciplinary approach is fundamental to the field of UD and housing quality. Innovation arises in the juncture between the users’ understanding of different disciplines. Hence, the NSHB encourages applicants to establish interdisciplinary cooperation in their projects.

5. Summary

This article argues that grant can be a driving force for innovation in UD, and that good UD requires several contributors; users, architects, developers, public authorities, etc. The grant enables the creation of new forms of collaboration and interdisciplinary projects that can further develop the discipline. For this to happen, it is essential to have financial instruments that encourage and stimulate such cooperation. The grant for development projects on UD in housing, buildings and outdoor areas seek to meet these types of collaboration, and is in this way an essential driving force.

References