



Advancing the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities worldwide

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## **FACT SHEET: INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF ACCESSIBILITY**

The International Symbol of Accessibility (ISA) was designed by Susanne Koefoed in 1968 at the request of RI Global's International Commission on Technology and Accessibility (ICTA). Copyrighted by the Committee, it was decided to make the use of this symbol open to all.

### ***Development of the Symbol of Accessibility***

By the late 1960s, the need for a symbol to designate accessible facilities was being discussed in a number of countries. In fact, different access symbols were already in use in France, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The symbol was also an idea of interest in Asia as a theme of the 1968 RI Pan-Pacific Rehabilitation Conference was "Promotion of Non-Handicapped Physical Environments for Disabled People." As former RI Global Secretary-General Norman Acton recalled some years later, "a number of different symbols were beginning to appear and several of us could see a messy situation developing with multiple symbols – so there was some urgency."

Acton asked Karl Montan, the first Director of the Swedish Handicap Institute and Chair of the RI International Commission for Technical Aids (ICTA), if the Commission could develop a single, viable design of an international symbol of access in time to present to the 11<sup>th</sup> RI World Congress in Dublin in 1969. The stipulations were that the symbol must be readily identifiable from a reasonable distance; must be self-descriptive; must be simple yet esthetically designed with no secondary meaning; and must be practical.

Montan agreed to take on the project and arranged for the Scandinavian Design Students Organization to tackle the assignment. Ms. Susanne Koefoed, a Danish graphic design student, submitted the winning design, a simple motif of a stick figure using a wheelchair to indicate barrier-free access. Taking the original copy of the submitted design, Montan 'humanized' it further by adding a circle to the top of the seated figure, thus giving it a 'head.' With the addition of the 'head', the World Congress formally adopted the Koefoed's Symbol in 1969.

### ***Sharing the Symbol with the World***

Distribution of the symbol was the next order of business. The effort was greatly assisted by the 3M corporation which produced a large supply of the symbol on self-adhesive materials for distribution to the public. Fenmore Seton, later President of RI and the owner of a manufacturing company, also contributed another large shipment of signs of the new symbol. Acton opened negotiations with the International Organization for Standardization (the ISO) in Geneva, whose membership includes the standard-setting organs of most governments. The ISO incorporated the symbol into their library of internationally recognized symbols with formal specifications as to dimensions and use.



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Following its adoption, the Society's final step was to consider how best to promote the Symbol. Within the Society, there was some debate over whether to patent the design. It was decided however, that this would prove particularly complex, and the objective was not to restrict use, but to ensure good usage. It was decided that public education and promotion would be more effective in ensuring that the symbol would be always kept in the public domain. To that end, the Society drew up guidelines for the use of the Symbol. This resolution was adopted at a subsequent meeting in the Society's Assembly in Baguio, Philippines in 1978. [Download the Resolution](#)

### ***RI and the United Nations***

The Symbol of Accessibility quickly gained wide acceptance and within the decade became a universally used way of designating an accessible facility. The single largest boost to universal adoption of the Symbol took place in 1974, when the United Nations gave its imprimatur and provided a technical backing for the Symbol, granting it a universal stature comparable to that granted several years earlier by the International Organization for Standards (ISO).

### ***Next Steps***

As the politics of disability have become more nuanced, a growing audience has lobbied for an updated version of the International Symbol. The leader in the discussions, the Accessible Icon Project, has created a new logo with a forward-leaning head and motioning arms indicating the figure as the "driver" or decision maker about his or her mobility. New York adopted the new symbol in 2014 and Connecticut has considered the changes, as have several Western states. The debate regarding the merits of the new vs. old symbol has also started to enter the fold of various activist organizations, including RI Global. The International Organization for Standardization has argued against the new design, citing universal recognition of the original one. Some disability rights activists also believe the new symbol implies prejudice toward people with more serious disabilities.

Proponents of the new symbol maintain they want the symbol to represent a new acceptance toward PwDs — one that does not underestimate them any longer. They believe the redesigned icon could prompt more funding and better social programs for PwDs. It has been suggested that a disability activist organization take the lead in bringing all parties to the table.