Safe, obvious, step-free: principles for inclusive places

Humans are diverse, and their needs of pedestrian infrastructure vary considerably. The level of detail needed to make places inclusive can be daunting for design professioanals. Waka Kotahi the NZ Transport Agency is incorporating design principles in the Pedestrian Network Guidance, to help transport design and planning professionals make good decisions in spite of the challenges inherent in catering to all humans.

The principles for walking environments are “safe”, “obvious”, and “step-free choices”.

Safe design means that people feel safe, and are protected form harm when using transport networks. For walking, safety means freedom from trip hazards, and from slippery surfaces. Safety from higher speed traffic includes separation from cyclists and motor vehicles, or sharing streets where speeds are managed so that the risk of collision and injury is low.

Obvious design means that everybody understands where the safe routes are through an area. It includes tactile wayfinding information, and printed signs and markings so that everybody is clear about where pedestrians can be expected, and how to navigate on foot or using a mobility aid. Obvious routes include digital information about route choices and navigation. Digital information that is obvious is in accessible formats for all people. It is reassuring for people prone to anxiety, who do not speak the local language, who have had a brain injury, or who have neurodiversity and therefore rely on clear and consistent messaging.

Step-free choices means that people who use small wheels or who cannot lift their feet easily can find routes with smooth and gentle gradients. Those routes should be safe and obvious, so that all pedestrians can navigate with comfort and confidence.