

Session 1 | Michael Fox AM | 'Access & Equity' | Detailed Summary

About Michael

Michael Fox AM is Director of Access Australia and Michael Fox Architects. His practices and experience span access advocacy, architectural design, heritage conservation, standards development and human rights. He initiated AS 1428.1, the foundational Australian Standard for access to buildings, and has also contributed to international human rights through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD).

Session context

Date	13 May 2026
Unit	ARC501 Architecture 1: Global Week 10 Guest Lecture
Topic	Access & Equity: Australian standards, legislation, and design implications for buildings on Country, in the tropics, and across the seasons
Editorial note	Detailed summary prepared from the edited transcript. The transcript format, timestamps and speaker-turn structure have been removed. Content has been reorganised thematically for teaching, revision and reference.

Overview

Michael Fox presented access and equity as central architectural concerns rather than secondary compliance matters. The slide deck framed the lecture through four linked components — from theory, research and legislation to design — and then moved between personal history, standards development, disability-rights advocacy, Australian legislation, international rights frameworks, the National Construction Code (NCC), performance-based design, and design implications for Northern Australia and housing on Country.

Accessibility should not be treated as a checklist added during or at the end of a project. It should be embedded from the beginning of design thinking, alongside research, theory, legislation, consultation and detailed architectural resolution. Fox framed access as a question of rights, dignity, participation and design quality.

The slide sequence moved from architecture and accessibility, to initiation of AS 1428, then from Standards Australia into legislation, before concluding with progressive awareness, UN adoption and the design implications for Northern Australia.

Key points

- Access and equity are inside architectural design, not outside it as a narrow compliance task.
- The development of AS 1428 was grounded in applied research actively involving people with a range of skills and disabilities and gained force through legislation.
- The central access concept is the continuous accessible path of travel: a building component is only useful if a person can reach and use it as part of a complete journey.
- The broader rights framework extends beyond buildings into transport, housing, work, education, health, digital systems and civic participation.
- The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) shifted access from goodwill and charity to legal obligation by making discrimination on the grounds of disability unlawful.
- Performance solutions support better, more flexible design outcomes when prescriptive provisions do not fit the actual project context.
- Northern Australia requires regionally appropriate design responses, especially in housing, climate, topography and community-led work on Country.
- Genuine consultation matters: the lecture emphasised the equity principle “nothing about us without us”.

1. Access as an architectural and human-rights issue

Fox opened by positioning himself not only as an architect and access consultant, but also as a human-rights advocate. He argued that architecture and access are connected because built environments shape who can participate in everyday life. Access is therefore not merely technical; it is social, legal, ethical and spatial.

His entry into the field came through architectural practice in the 1970s. While working in his father’s Sydney practice, he was assigned to a residential project for Lionel Watts, a client with polio who could use only one arm. Watts asked why he could not have a well-designed house like anyone else. At that time, there were no clear rules or regulations for accessible housing, so the work required practical invention.

Watts later challenged Fox to “change all this” by helping establish legislation and standards. This personal encounter became the starting point for a long involvement in access research, standards development, consulting and advocacy.

2. From charity to rights

A major conceptual frame in the lecture was the movement from a charity model of disability to a rights-based model. Fox traced this shift to the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars, when many people with disability were institutionalised or treated as recipients of charity rather than as rights-bearing citizens.

Over time, disability advocacy moved through rehabilitation, accessibility, inclusion, participation and empowerment towards a rights framework. Rehabilitation International (RI), established in 1922, was identified as an important global organisation in this history. Disabled Peoples’ International (DPI) contributed the key slogan “nothing about us without us”, which Fox presented as a central principle for standards, legislation, design and consultation.

Point made

The shift from charity to rights changes the role of architecture. Design is no longer a benevolent provision for a minority group; it becomes part of the basic infrastructure of equitable citizenship.

3. Development of AS 1428

Fox described the development of AS 1428 as an applied, collaborative and research-driven process. After approaching Standards Australia, he established and chaired the ME64 AS 1428 committee for the initial ten years.

The committee included people with disability from across Australia, government representatives, architects, occupational therapists and others involved in the built environment.

The committee received a Federal Government research grant and used practical testing to establish dimensions, gradients and other access provisions. Fox described testing different ramps, handrails and configurations with people with a wide range of disabilities. This research informed the standard rather than relying only on theoretical assumptions.

The original ambition of AS 1428 was broad. It covered public buildings, private buildings, transport and a more holistic approach to accessibility. Through negotiation with the New South Wales Government, however, private housing proved politically difficult at the time. The standard was divided into AS 1428.1, which government was prepared to legislate for public buildings, and AS 1428.2, which retained enhanced and additional requirements as broader best-practice material.

Point made

An Australian Standard has no legal force by itself. It becomes powerful only when it is called up into legislation, such as through the NCC or related legal instruments.

4. Continuous accessible path of travel

The most important design concept in AS1428 is the continuous accessible path of travel. Fox explained that the early committee work began by focusing on individual components: toilets, ramps, doorways, door handles and similar elements. Through consultation and testing, however, the committee realised that isolated components were not enough.

A compliant accessible toilet is irrelevant if a person cannot get to it. A ramp, doorway or sign does not solve access by itself. What matters is the sequence of movement and use: entry, circulation, wayfinding, destination, return journey and participation.

The continuous accessible path of travel is defined at the beginning of AS 1428 and runs through the standard. Fox described it as a way of making architects think beyond fragments and towards the complete experience of a user with limited mobility moving through the built environment.

Extension: the process of access

Through his later work with the United Nations, Fox expanded this idea into the broader “process of access”. This process extends beyond buildings to include getting up in the morning, moving through the street, using public transport, accessing railway stations, using computers and participating in everyday civic life.

5. Positive terminology and design culture

Fox emphasised the importance of terminology. The AS 1428 committee avoided phrases such as “disabled toilet” because the item is not disabled. The preferred and adopted terminology is “accessible toilet”, “accessible path”, “accessible parking” and similar positive language.

This point was not merely semantic. The language of access can either reinforce deficit-based thinking or support a rights-based and design-led understanding of accessibility. Positive terminology helps shift design culture away from treating people as problems and towards inclusive and equitable environments.

6. DDA, Access to Premises Standards and the legal framework

Fox identified 1993 as a turning point because it was both the year Sydney won the Olympic and Paralympic Games and the year the DDA was enacted. The DDA made discrimination on the grounds of disability unlawful and gave accessibility a stronger legal basis across Australia. The slide deck then marked 2000 — the Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games — as the delivery moment that mainstreamed access provisions across major public projects.

At the time, buildings could technically comply with the existing version of AS 1428 and still be difficult or impossible for some people to use. Complaints under the DDA placed pressure on Standards Australia, the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB) and government to improve the standard. This process led to a stronger relationship between standards, building regulation and disability-rights law.

The Access to Premises Standards (APS) created an important bridge between the DDA and building compliance. Fox described its concepts of reasonableness and unjustifiable hardship as important tools for resolving complex design situations. The point is not simply whether every prescriptive rule has been followed, but whether a fair, reasonable and defensible access outcome has been achieved.

7. Sydney Olympics as a mainstreaming moment

The Sydney Olympic and Paralympic Games were a major moment for mainstreaming access in Australian design and construction. After Sydney won the Games in 1993, Fox and others recommended that the 2000 Games should be both accessible and green. Government accepted this agenda, and accessibility became a central requirement for Olympic and Paralympic projects.

Fox described running workshops with architects and builders who initially saw access as a burden. The message to those project teams was that access was now law, but also that it should be integrated intelligently into design rather than treated as a late compliance add-on.

Point made

The Olympics helped shift access consulting from voluntary advocacy into a recognised professional field. It also helped embed access as a mainstream architectural and construction issue.

8. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

As RI President 2004 to 2008, Fox linked the Australian access agenda to international human rights advocacy, through the 2006 UN CRPD. Australia ratified the Convention in 2008, and Fox described it as one of the most successful UN conventions, with over 180 international ratifications to date.

A central achievement of the Convention process was the insistence that national delegations include people with disability, not just government officials. This requirement forced governments to engage directly with disability communities and embodied the principle “nothing about us without us”.

Fox also stressed that the Convention is not only about physical access. It covers education, employment, health, rehabilitation, transport, legal capacity and wider participation in life. One of the most powerful issues was legal capacity: the shift from substituted decision-making to supported decision-making for people with severe intellectual or other disabilities.

Point made

Rights-based access is broader than ramps and buildings. It concerns the social, legal and political conditions that allow people to participate in decisions affecting their lives.

9. NCC, BCA and how standards become enforceable

The lecture clarified the relationship between the NCC, the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and Australian Standards. The NCC is the current umbrella framework. It includes the Building Code of Australia and the Plumbing Code, and it sets requirements across different classes of buildings.

Fox explained that standards become legally significant when they are called up by the NCC or other legislation. This was illustrated through the latest AS 1428.1:2021, which was called up in NCC 2022. The lecture also noted the uneven adoption of NCC provisions by states and territories, including delays and exemptions.

Housing remained a contested area. Livable housing provisions were included in NCC 2022 but were not adopted in New South Wales or Western Australia. Fox connected this resistance to industry lobbying and the perceived difficulty of making accessibility mandatory in private housing. Fox is currently involved in national housing equity programs.

10. Deemed-to-satisfy and performance solutions

A major practical distinction in the lecture was between deemed-to-satisfy provisions and performance solutions. Deemed-to-satisfy provisions are prescriptive: they specify dimensions, heights, widths, gradients and other measurable requirements. They provide clarity but can be rigid in complex projects.

Performance solutions allow an alternative pathway. They ask whether the design achieves the intent of the code and standard, even if it does not follow every prescriptive detail exactly. Fox described this as a lateral and evidence-based mode of compliance that can be especially valuable where constraints are real and well documented.

He gave the example of a high-rise project where infrastructure constraints affected path-of-travel widths. In that situation, the performance solution had to explain the constraint, assess the access implications and justify why the modified outcome remained acceptable.

Design implication

Performance solutions should not be used to avoid accessibility. They should be used to deliver equivalent or better access outcomes when prescriptive compliance does not fit the project reality.

11. Design implications for students and practitioners

Fox's message to students and academics was to embrace accessibility as part of good design. Access should improve design quality rather than diminish it. This means considering access early, integrating it spatially and testing the logic of movement, use and choice across the whole project.

Chris Fox added that students and practitioners do not need to memorise the entire BCA or NCC as abstract documents. A more productive approach is to design, identify specific access or compliance questions as they arise, and then look up the relevant standards and provisions. Over time, common dimensions and principles become part of design practice.

Point made

Compliance knowledge becomes useful when it is tied to design problems. The goal is not to memorise the code, but to develop judgement about when and how to use it.

12. Reasonableness, choice and user experience

In response to a student question about public stairs, lifts and alternative access, Fox returned to reasonableness. The design question is not just whether a lift exists somewhere, but whether the alternative route is fair and usable. A 20-metre diversion may be reasonable in some situations; a 200-metre diversion may not be.

Fox also warned against assuming that one access provision suits everyone. Some people with walking sticks or artificial legs may prefer stairs to ramps because ramps can be harder to negotiate. This reinforces the importance of providing choice, such as stairs and ramps, rather than assuming a single universal pathway will meet every need.

Point made

Accessibility is not a single solution. It is a design obligation to provide reasonable, usable and dignified choices across different bodies, abilities and contexts.

13. Northern Australia, housing and First Nations consultation

The final part of the lecture shifted towards Northern Australia, housing, Country and First Nations disability advocacy. Fox referred to a 2018 Townsville workshop about housing in First Nations communities. Participants included elders from Red Dust Healing and representatives from First Peoples Disability Network Australia.

The key outcome was the **fundamental** need for genuine consultation. Fox linked this directly to the principle “nothing about us without us”: design must be led with, and not merely delivered to, the people affected by it. This is especially important in housing on Country, where climate, culture, family structures, maintenance, disability, topography and seasonal conditions all shape what a building needs **to provide**.

Fox suggested that performance solutions may be especially useful in the Northern Territory because housing models, environmental conditions and community needs vary significantly. Rather than applying generic solutions, designers need regionally appropriate responses that are defensible, inclusive and grounded in local consultation.

14. Respect, balance and First Peoples Disability Network

Fox referred to First Nations principles of respect and balance, attributed to Sean Gordon — former CEO of Darkinjung Local Aboriginal Land Council, north of Sydney. He described respect as respect for all people and all things, and balance as the need to balance what one does and what one takes in the environment. These principles were presented as relevant to both access and work on Country.

First Peoples Disability Network Australia (FPDN) was identified as an important organisation for developing accessibility programs. Fox noted FPDN attention to embedding cultural, physical, digital and systemic inclusivity into practice. He also discussed FPDN’s response to NDIS reforms, including FPDN CEO and Worimi man Damian Griffiths’s criticism that First Nations people with disability were not adequately centred in policy discussion.

Point made

Access is not only physical. In First Nations contexts, accessibility must also be cultural, physical, digital, systemic, relational and place-specific.

15. Examples of access becoming mainstream

Fox used kerb ramps and low-floor buses to show how access innovations can become ordinary infrastructure. Kerb ramps were associated with places such as Heidelberg in Germany, where post-war disability and amputee populations drove accessible-city thinking. Fox helped bring that knowledge into Australian access work through the City of Sydney Access Committee and AS 1428.

Low-floor buses were linked to practical innovation in Hong Kong, where lowering the bus chassis through cranked axle design provided the catalyst for more accessible transport. Over time, low-floor buses became standard internationally. These examples demonstrate that accessibility can move from specialist intervention to everyday benefits and integration.

16. References raised in the lecture

Fox identified two major references for students and faculty interested in Country, sustainability and First Nations knowledge.

- Karl-Erik Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe, *Treading Lightly*: a reference on Indigenous knowledge, sustainability and living with Country over long timeframes.
- The First Knowledges series edited by Margo Neale, including *Building on Country*, as part of a wider set of volumes on Country, law, astronomy, songlines, food, medicine and other knowledge systems.

These references were positioned as ways for architecture students to connect access and equity with broader questions of place, knowledge, Country and long-term environmental responsibility.

Key terms and acronyms

Term	Meaning in the lecture
AS 1428	Australian Standard for access and mobility. AS 1428.1 is the standard for access to buildings; Fox chaired the committee involved in its early development.
AS 1428.2	Enhanced and additional access requirements originally retained as broader best-practice material beyond the legislated Part 1 provisions.
DDA	Disability Discrimination Act 1992. It made discrimination on the grounds of disability unlawful and strengthened the legal basis for access.
ABCB	Australian Building Codes Board. It prepares and maintains the National Construction Code framework.
NCC	National Construction Code. The umbrella construction code that includes the Building Code of Australia and Plumbing Code.

BCA	Building Code of Australia. Now understood as part of the broader NCC framework.
Access to Premises Standards	A framework connecting disability-discrimination law with building access compliance, including concepts such as reasonableness and unjustifiable hardship.
Continuous accessible path of travel	The complete usable route through a building or environment, rather than isolated compliant components.
Process of access	A broader concept extending access from buildings to transport, digital systems, work, education and everyday participation.
Deemed-to-satisfy	A prescriptive compliance pathway that sets exact measurable requirements.
Performance solution	An alternative compliance pathway that demonstrates the design meets the intent of the code or standard through reasoned evidence.
UN CRPD	United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Australia in 2008.
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme. Discussed in relation to housing, disability support and First Nations disability advocacy.
FPDN	First Peoples Disability Network Australia. A key organisation working across First Nations disability rights and cultural, physical, digital and systemic access.

Teaching implications for ARC501, ARC522 and ARC524

- 1. ARC501 Architecture 1: Global.** The lecture supports design thinking about how buildings are sited, entered, circulated through and used by different bodies in tropical, seasonal and culturally specific conditions.
- 2. ARC522 Architecture Research Theory and Practice.** The development of AS 1428 demonstrates how research, testing, user participation and policy negotiation can directly shape design standards and professional practice.
- 3. ARC524 Contemporary Theory in Practice.** The rights-based framing opens questions about whose knowledge counts, who is included in architectural decision-making, and how built environments can reproduce or reduce exclusion.
- 4. ARC502 Architecture 2: Social.** The lecture anticipates Semester 2 concerns by positioning access, consultation, housing, disability and Country as social design questions rather than technical afterthoughts.

Questions for follow-up discussion

- Where in a design process should access be tested: briefing, site strategy, plan development, detail design, construction review, post-occupancy, or all of these?
- How can a design studio assess the continuous accessible path of travel rather than only checking isolated dimensions?
- When is a performance solution genuinely equitable, and when does it risk becoming a way to avoid proper access?
- How should access standards be interpreted in remote, tropical or culturally specific housing contexts?
- What would “nothing about us without us” mean in the briefing, design and review of buildings on Country?
- How can access be understood as cultural, digital and systemic, not only physical?

Closing summary

The lecture presented access as a design, research, legislative and ethical concern. Fox’s central message was that better accessibility produces better architecture and more equitable environments. The slide deck closed by asking practitioners to combine theory, research, legislation and design in practice, and to develop regionally appropriate design responses.

For students, the key lesson is to treat access as a generative design framework. A project should not simply comply at the end. It should be conceived from the beginning around movement, participation, choice, dignity, equity, regional appropriateness and the lived experience.
