

Speak, So that I May See

Olga Bechelen



Image from <https://vk.com/speakingcity>

Speaking Cities Help People Who Are Blind

Have you ever tried crossing a road with your eyes closed? Or taking public transportation? Or finding the entrance to an unfamiliar building? These everyday tasks can be difficult even for those with perfect vision. For people who are blind or visually impaired, these tasks can be dangerous. Fortunately, technology is here to make our life easier.

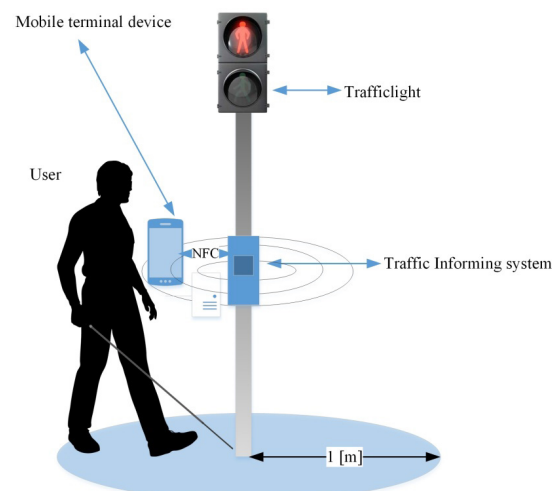
One unique innovation is a system called Speaking City, developed by a group of engineers in Saint Petersburg, Russia. This system allows visually impaired people to cross streets safely, board the correct bus, and locate building entrances.

How Does the System Work?

The Speaking City system consists of radio signals installed at key public locations. Users carry a special push-button device or use a smartphone app that connects them to the Speaking City system. When a blind pedestrian approaches an intersection, the system announces the name of the street and warns the pedestrian when the

green light is about to end. Thus, a blind person can feel safer when crossing the street.

At bus stops, users receive voice messages with helpful information, such as the name of the stop, which buses stop there, and the expected arrival time. When a bus approaches, the system informs the user about the route number, direction of the travel, and the door location. The user can even notify the driver in advance that they plan to board.





Tactile surfaces warn the pedestrian that an intersection is ahead. They are also used on train platforms. Photo from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/daveynin/32717838654>. Licensed under Creative Commons 2.0.

If a blind person wants to enter a public building, the system can help with that too. It announces the name of the facility and warns about any steps or ramps. It even lets the user remotely call for staff assistance if needed. Recently, Speaking City was integrated with intercom systems in residential buildings which helped people not only find the correct entrance, but also open the door remotely.

No One Should Be Left Behind

The Speaking City system is an important step toward a more friendly urban environment. By helping visually impaired individuals navigate with confidence, cross the streets, take transport and find buildings, they can feel more independent and the city can enjoy their participation. No one should be left behind. As we continue to develop smarter cities, visually impaired people will be better integrated into society, and that is good for everyone!

I Had a Small Role!

I knew one of the team members who brought the Speaking City system to life. Her name is Maria Romashova. I used to be her English tutor. Then

she asked if I could work with her colleagues too. So I taught English to the managers and the engineers at her workplace.

I was so happy to notice recently that Maria Romashova won an award: Best Social Entrepreneur. Looking back at the time I was connected to her project, I remember how much enthusiasm I felt. I was so energized by the work, by the people, and by the sense of purpose. Sometimes I miss that feeling – the sense that I mattered.

Sources: <https://vk.com/@speakingcity>
<https://sberbusiness.live/publications/govoriashchii-gorod>
<https://bearr.org/regional-news/social-entrepreneurship-awards-announced-in-moscow/>

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what is a speaking city?
2. Does your city have any “speaking” elements? If so, describe them.



Olga Bechelene is a student at Shoreline Adult Education in Branford, Connecticut. She was born and raised in Saint Petersburg, Russia, and relocated to Connecticut in 2023. Feeling a bit isolated, she joined adult education classes to make new friends and get to know local people. She is an optimist and sees life as a thrilling adventure.