Ivercome' and 'What barriers in your work would you see as presenting the greatest level of difficulty?'

It was clear from the qualitative stage of this research that new technology enhanced the employment experiences of many disabled people whilst the status of the participant's body remained exactly the same, i.e. 'uncorrected'. No disabled participant discussed the benefits of new technology in terms of it augmenting or compensating for their bodies. The way forward is clearly to build on this use of a social-barriers model of disablement in other research contexts. Indeed disability researchers are duty-bound to establish at the outset the research issues disabled people themselves raise and the model of disability being adopted. The research participants were not schooled in the social model of disability: only two of those interviewed belonged to a disability organization of any kind. In this way the research cannot be criticized for using an unrepresentative study group. The findings of this research augur well for future research applying a social model of disability.

Further reading

Oppression, Disability and Access in the Built Environment

Rob Imrie

As materials for culture, the stones of the modern city seem badly laid by planners and architects, in that the shopping mall, the parking lot, the apartment house elevator do not suggest in their form the complexities of how people might live. What were once the experiences of places appear now as floating mental operations. (Sennett, 1990, p. xi)

In the last decade access for disabled people to public buildings and facilities in cities has become an important part of the political agenda, and many public authorities internationally are promoting strategies for accessible built environments. In particular there is more awareness that disabled people, in their everyday lives, are having to confront hostile built environments, ones where access to buildings, streets and places is often impossible. Western cities are characterized by a design apartheid where building form and design are inscribed with the values of an 'able-bodied' society. Thus, from steps into shops to the absence of induction loops in public and civic buildings, disabled people have to confront built environments which were never designed to cater for a range of bodily differences. This has led some commentators to regard the built environment as disablist, that is, projecting 'able-bodied' values which legitimize oppressive and discriminatory practices against disabled people purely on the basis that they have physical and/or mental impairments.

For instance, day-to-day artefacts which the able-bodied take for granted are usually (literally) out of reach, or unavailable, for the wheelchair-bound person. Thus, most cash-dispensing machines are placed too high for wheelchair users to reach, while clothes retailers
have few changing facilities for people in wheelchairs. Moreover, Barnes (1991) indicates that society’s ignorance of sign languages generally excludes the deaf and hard-of-hearing from a range of public places, while concluding that disabled people’s ability to perform even the most routine of daily tasks is thus severely diminished because of a predominantly inaccessible environment (p. 180). Indeed the urban environment is generally inaccessible for a range of people with disabilities, characterized as it is by, for example, the interwar expansion of the suburbs, which, aligned to the postwar spatial divisions of city functions, generated cities which increasingly placed a premium on individual mobility. As Hahn (1986) notes, in his discussion of Los Angeles, for people with disabilities the city is a vast desert containing few oases.

Critical to the production of such disablist and disabling environments are the roles of architects and/or design professionals. Indeed architects, and other design professionals, are implicated in the production of the built environment, in developing aesthetic values and propagating specific conceptions of design. In this sense architectural ideas and practices are of importance to explore in order to gain some understanding of how disablist spaces in the built environment are developed and perpetuated. In discussing such themes I divide the chapter into three. First I consider the interrelationships between architects, power and the built environment, and develop the argument that the perpetuation of disablist spaces is critically linked to the socio-institutional practices of architects and the wider design professions. Second, I relate such ideas to the importance of modernism in the construction of the disablist city. While modernism, as a set of ideas and related socio-political practices, is not exclusively responsible for the construction of disablist cities, it can be argued that it has been the dominant force in their postwar reconstruction. In a concluding section I consider the possibilities for the development of emancipatory architecture and accessible environments.

Architects, power and the built environment

Over the last twenty years a powerful critique of the role of the architect, in the perpetuation of gendered, racial, and other divisions in the city, has emerged (Dicken, 1980; Knox, 1987). It is premised on the idea that the interplay between the ideologies and institutional practices of the design professions, within the wider context of particular socio-economic strictures, has served to exclude minority interests while reinforcing an alienating and oppressive built environment. The documentary material ranges widely from accounts which show how the built form is inattentive to the needs of women to those which suggest that spaces are segregated on a racialized and disablist basis. Indeed, as Matrix (1984) notes, there is an assumption by architects of 'sameness', of normality, amongst the population, ‘that all sections of the community want the environment to do the same things for them’ (p. 3). Such ideas have been sustained through three interconnected dimensions of the design process, that is, the (ideological) assertion of the aesthetic or privileging the idea of building form over use; the professionalization of architectural and other design practices, thus creating a new technical, 'expert' elite; and the rise of the corporate economy as the dominant clientele.

In considering the relationship between aesthetic values and the production of the built environment, Ghirardo (1991) has noted how many architects still see their practices as about the designer providing buildings with critical capacities, so that the architect can engage with contemporary problems through formal manipulation’ (Ghirardo, 1991, p. 12). In such views it is assumed that architecture is a form of artistic expression and endeavour, and, in Ghirardo’s (1991) terms, ‘that art has a high moral purpose in the formation and transmission of culture... of the design of aesthetically pleasing forms of poetic spaces’ (p. 9). This, then, projects the architect as a purveyor of beauty and truth, an elevated being somehow with the abilities and skills to construct for (in distinction to with) the population as a whole. Indeed such conceptions have performed a powerful ideological role in architecture, especially, as Sennett (1990) has argued, one of self-legitimation through the perpetuation of discourses which seek to elevate the practices of architects to a form of objective neutrality, the idea of the rational technicist operating for a willing and compliant clientele.

In particular, as McGlynn and Murrain (1994) note, it has never been a feature of the culture, social ethics and/or practices of design professionals to see themselves as part of wider political processes. As they comment, architects seem to have limited understanding of the relationships between values, design objectives and the design intentions derived from them, with design theory tending to concentrate on
the technocratic and technological, reducing questions of access and form to the functional aspects of the subject, yet ignoring what Davies and Lifchez (1987) have termed the social psychology of design or trying to understand what it is that people really want (see also Dicken, 1980, p. 353). In this sense, as Davies and Lifchez (1987) have argued, the popularization of architecture as 'high art', or pure design, is underpinned by a capacity to perpetuate an impersonal, often alienating, practice, given that the focus is about the aesthetic, or the building form, not the user and/or the pragmatics of the functioning of the building. Buildings, then, in this interpretation, are treated as an abstraction, something over and beyond, somehow able to transcend, the socio-political contexts within which they are produced.

Such conceptions, as the next section of the chapter will show, reached their apogee under the postwar modern movement where the emphasis on minimalist form sought to reduce the complexity of human movement and building use to a singular set of rules and/or laws, or the idea that all human action is knowable and controllable. As emphasis on minimalist form sought to reduce the complexity of socio-political contexts within which they are produced.

Sennett (1990) and others have commented, the idea of control, coupled with the perpetuation of the ideology of architect as artist, was simultaneously disarming and disabling in a number of interrelated ways. Foremost, it perpetuated a representation of the architect as 'expert', so providing a legitimization to practise unfettered by wider public and/or corporate controls. In this sense the architect was more or less untouchable. In addition the 'expert' characterization, reinforced by architects aligning themselves to the idea that their practices were somehow underpinned by a scientific rationalism, was crucial in signalizing to a wider public that they were there to be 'acted on', that architectural knowledge was something to be handed down, or a form of received wisdom. Such paternalism was, and still is, a crucial ingredient in denying the subjectivities of the very users of the built environment.

However, the ideological nature of the aesthetic and the technical, of the architect as somehow a neutral arbiter, able and willing to provide for all, has been exposed by a range of writers who indicate how the institutional nature of the profession is dominated by a strand of conservatism which seeks to perpetuate ablest, masculine, values (Imrie, 1996; Laws, 1994; Rose, 1990). As Matrix (1984) and others have argued, built spaces in the postwar period have emphasized mobility over accessibility and have placed a premium on, for example, individuals owning a car. Indeed, designers tended to generate, and perpetuate, exclusive, segregated, spaces, primarily because of a stereotypical conception of people as somehow being similar in their capacities both to get access to and to move around the built environment. Yet, clearly, this is not the case and the myth of the 'normal person', of a white male, has been a powerful dimension of the design process, yet one which has had, and continues to have, clear racist, sexist, and ableist underpinnings. This, then, is far from designing for the subjective being, for human diversity, in the way which authors like Davies and Lifchez (1987) call for.

In particular it is clear that such exclusions were, and still are, enshrined and maintained by virtue of the institutionalized nature of the architectural profession (see Knox, 1987). A significant part of this relates to its wider governing bodies, especially the architectural schools and other regulatory bodies which have the primary responsibility for overseeing professional practices and conduct. Indeed a range of literature indicates how the governing, corporate bodies, like the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), have been complicit in reinforcing the elitist structures of architecture, and, as Lifchez and Winslow (1979) have argued, while the proportion of the population with disabilities grows, the architectural profession has been slow in taking account of the environmental implications of an ageing and/or increasingly disabled population - few practitioners, less than 4 per cent in the USA, even fewer in the UK, have a disability. Indeed, even where perspectives on disability are taught in architectural schools, they are still treated as an after-thought, an add-on and/or a special-interest subject, or what Davies and Lifchez (1987) have referred to as being underpinned by a 'system of indifference'.

The relative absence of corporate controls over architects, then, relates to some extent to the privatized nature of architectural practices. Yet, while disablist design can, in part, be understood as being perpetuated by the fragmentary nature of this system, a crucial aspect of our understanding also relates to the hierarchical and elitist nature of (privatized) clientist patronage that architects are locked into, and, crucially, to related systems of economic power. As Crawford (1992) notes, the peculiarities of the rise of the architectural profession left architects more or less wholly dependent upon a small group of clients who could afford to support them and their ambitions. Thus, while some architects gained status and economic remuneration, primarily
by being sponsored by business and corporate capital, their autonomy
was (and still is) heavily circumscribed by their clients (for an extended
discussion of this see Crawford, 1992). As Crawford argues, 'archi-
tecture, a luxury rather than an indispensable service, remained within
a pre-modern model of elite patronage, its provision of services prim-
arily dictated by economic power' (1992, p. 31).

Indeed, as Crawford (1992) recounts, the dependence of architects
on the wider corporate economy was a determinant of their loss of
technical and economic control over building projects and, by the early
1950s, the combination of systems building, new technologies and the
rise of the global economy was beginning to undercut both their status
and their levels of autonomy (Knox, 1987; Sennett, 1990; Wolfe,
1981). As Sennett (1990) and others have commented, the estrange-
ment of architects from the wider building processes was paralleled by
the emergence of a division of architectural labour which drew increas-
ing numbers of architects into managerial and bureaucratic roles, while
reducing the amount of new building being commissioned through
architectural practices (Knox, 1987). In this sense the extent to which
architects, and other building designers, were exercising control over
the built form was increasingly being challenged by a range of structural
factors, and, as Crawford (1992) has noted, it is the materialities of the
land market, or 'the actualities of the building industry, and the limits
set by the clients paying the bills' (p. 38), which have become the
dominant element in restraining the autonomy of architects and/or
designers.

Thus, the emergence of corporate economics was, as Jencks (1987)
points out, crucial in perpetuating the move towards technological
standardization and scale economies in building design, while seeking
to realize cost savings by utilizing cost-efficient building methods which
made few concessions to the range of users who did not conform to the
conception of the able-bodied client. For the modern corporation the
idea that people were 'all of a type', that they too could be standardized
like a piece of technology, was, in part, incorporated into the lay-out
and design of the emergent workplaces, and, as Sennett (1990) has
observed, modern buildings are less flexible than the 'rows, crescents,
and blocks of the past', while the specific layout of the modern office
environment is task-dedicated and more or less impossible to change

Disabling ideas and the modern ideal in architecture

While the contemporary Western city is characterized by a pastiche, a
constellation of diverse styles and forms, the dominant ideas and
practices which have done most to shape it are clearly linked to modern
aesthetic philosophies and socio-political institutions. For McGlynn
and Murrain (1994) the rise of modern architecture was based on the
advent of segregated and mono-functional forms, an aesthetic closely
aligned to the rise of the corporate economy. Indeed the engineering
aesthetics of the modern movement were, as Weisman (1992) notes,
built upon an abstract, intellectual purity of rational, geometric, forms
and a mass-produced industrial technology. Any sense in which it
could relate to differences in body, human behaviour or access require-
ments were all but lost in a style that many have referred to as
'non-contextual' architecture, premised on forms which seemed to
deny human subjectivity and the differences in bodily experiences and
forms. In 1929, for instance, the English architect Eileen Gray charac-
terized such non-contextuality in the following terms:

In this sense modernism was founded upon the idea of the minimalist
building and/or design bereft of (bourgeois) ornamentation, or, as
Wolfe (1981) comments, buildings were to express function and struc-
ture and nothing else. In particular, the movement which grew up
around such ideals, including the Bauhaus school, Les Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture, Archigram and the Ekistics school, asserted the importance of science and technology in the production of the built form, of the need to build inexpensively, to provide for all in the community. Its clarion call, originally espoused by the American architect Louis Sullivan, was that form should follow function, a maxim which many interpreted as the search for universal laws of human habituation and behaviour, of the possibilities of producing 'pure' design, singular styles and forms which were grafted from the essence of the human being. In this sense functionality was expressed as a means of maximizing building utility, premised upon the idea that human behaviour was wholly predictable and knowable, that human beings conformed to a type, to particular patterns of (able-bodied) normality in both bodily and mental terms. Thus human beings were, in this conception, reducible to a specific essence, an essence which, as we shall see, was the embodiment of ableist thinking.

In particular, the ableist nature of modernist ideas is revealed, in part, by its conception of functionality whereby there was a departure from seeking an individual or specific solution for what Sullivan (1947) termed 'a true normal type'. The search for such normality was evident in the thinking of one of the leading exponents of modernism, Le Corbusier, who believed that the propagation of universal properties in form-giving was an essential underpinning of the architect's mission, or, as he commented, 'all men [sic] have the same organism, the same functions ... the same needs' (1927, p. 27). This search for normality, an inner essence, in people, provided the context from which a distinctively modern movement interpretation of 'form follows function' evolved, or, as Le Corbusier noted, 'the establishment of a standard involved evoking every practical and reasonable possibility and extracting from them a recognized type conformable to all functions with a maximum output and a minimum use of means and workmanship and material, words, forms, colours, sounds' (p. 27). The discovery of this 'standard', then, was at the root of the modern preoccupation with function, and, as Le Corbusier (1927) argued, the bare essentials of architecture are provided by aesthetic forms which he defined as being 'determined by the dimensions of man [sic] and the space he occupies' (quoted by Gardiner, 1974, p. 79; see also Sullivan, 1947). For Le Corbusier architecture could be defined only in and through the symbiosis between people and nature, and, as he commented, 'man must be rediscovered' (quoted by Gardiner, 1974, p. 79).

Yet this rediscovery was wholly based on a particular, ableist, gender-specific, conception of the person, an idealized man who was presented as the embodiment of normality. This embodiment of normality was expressed in a diagram conceived by Le Corbusier in 1925 called the Modular, a device which utilized the proportions of the (able) body to enable the architect to create the built spaces, or, as Le Corbusier argued, 'one needs to tie buildings back to the scale of the human being'. Yet, as Figure 9.1 indicates, the Modular presents an image of an upright person, muscular, taut, obviously strong, male, and displaying no outward sign of either physical and/or mental disability. It is the person for whom functionality in building design and form was being defined, a person who gained widespread acceptance in most elements of the modern movement and beyond. Such conceptions can also be extended to incorporate the possibilities that the denial of bodily differences was also premised on the idea of asexuality as the moral, or ethical, standard bearer of the emergent aesthetics of modernism.

Indeed, as Batchelor (1994) comments, authentic modernism, predicated on the extent to which it excluded, was probably white, male, and uneasy with sexuality. Many modernists addressed the emotive, sensuous aspects of experience and the possibilities that these opened up in terms of modern architecture and design. But only certain forms were licensed. Others were regularly rejected as anti-rational, barbaric and representing a retreat to the primitive. (p. 115)

As O'Neil (1995) has noted, one of the ironies of the modernist project was the way in which its rationalism abstracted from the socio-political contexts of its practices, failing to communicate, or interact, with those who were the (often unsuspecting) recipients of the resultant built forms. As Knox (1987) has commented, how then could modernism ever hope to know of the subjective experiences of the users of the built environment when its philosophies more or less discounted the realm of the experiential, personalized, experience? As Wolfe (1981) and Knox (1987) have described, the leading exponents of modernism – Gropius, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, even its critic, Robert Venturi – asserted the 'special insights' of architects, of their privileged access to
Figure 9.1 The Modular by Le Corbusier was devised in 1947. Modular man is 6ft tall and became a standard for architects and/or designers to build from. It seeks to present the human body as singular and universal, as a type. In this sense, it is insensitive to bodily variations.

knowledge. For instance, as Mies van der Rohe once replied, when asked if he ever submitted alternative schemes to clients, ‘Only one. Always. And the best one that we can give. That is where you can fight for what you believe in. He doesn’t always have to choose. How can he choose? He hasn’t the capacity to choose’ (quoted by Prak, 1984, p. 95). In this sense modernism was underpinned by a ‘theory of technocracy, government by experts, rather than democracy, government by people’ (Steinberger, 1985, p. 39). Consequently, the (claimed) intellectual purity of modernism descended into forms of what Knox (1987) has termed ‘vain arrogance’ or the perpetuation of an elitism whereby ‘clients, other professionals, and users were systematically excluded and often patronised’ (p. 369).

Not surprisingly, then, the abstractions of modernism, coupled with an elitist philosophy, were, in part, at the root of the estrangement of people from being able to influence the processes of production of the built environment. The emphasis on sameness, on uniformity, was problematical for its failure to differentiate between users and how places and spaces need to be multi-functional to cope with human diversity. In particular, commentators on the rise of the early, nineteenth-century, modern city refer to the onset of a placelessness, of an absence of variegated and differentiated spaces, of the dearth of place markers and/or signifiers (Giddens, 1991). In addition, a placelessness was seemingly underpinned by what Sennett (1990) has argued to be the modernist preoccupation with notions of functionality and wholeness which, as he suggests, generated conflicts between buildings and people, not the least of which is that ‘the value of a building as a form is often contrary with its value in use’ (p. 98). This observation prompted Sennett to refer to modernism as ‘bequeathing the anti-social building’ precisely because he saw the problems being generated by virtue of the irreducibility of human diversity to the types of environments which were being created.

Indeed, in terms of the legacies of the movement, of style and form, modernism has been characterized by designer ableism in a number of respects. As Moore and Bloomer (1977) have noted, for instance, in modern architecture the multiple changes of level ‘have often been used to delineate and enliven space’ yet in ways which elevate the aesthetic above the pragmatics of use (p. 4). Thus, the interplay between levels, connected by steps, is integral to a design which seeks to display divisible, yet interconnected, functional, spaces. Moreover, the
minimalism underpinning much modernist design does little to differentiate between walls, floors or furniture, while stairs, notorious barriers to mobility and access, have often been given symbolic roles. Indeed the main effect of the Bauhaus movement, one of the linchpins of modernism, was to reduce space, to automate and to utilize standard, off-the-shelf materials, primarily in an attempt to persuade people into using a certain kind of predetermined design. In this sense, bodily differences were being denied, and architects and designers were seeking to standardize, and engineer, people's bodily interactions with the built environment.

Emancipatory architecture and accessible environments

While modernist ideals are alienating and fundamentally ableist, the possibilities for alternative ways of thinking and practising exist and there are a range of socio-architectural practices based on a contrasting set of ideas and philosophies about the interactions between humans and the built environment. Perhaps the most widely espoused is that of universal design, an approach to the construction of the built environment premised on, as Weisman (1992) calls it, a 'flexible architecture' or one based on structures which are 'demountable, reasonable, multifunctional, and changeable over time' (Weisman, 1992, p. 32). As Weisman (1992) notes, the (modernist) construction of the built environment conceives of spaces as somehow fixed and unchanging, while buildings have tended to be (and still are) dedicated to single functions, creating a form of stasis or unchanging places. However, people and places are fluid, transformative, and multi-dimensional, yet much architecture seeks to fossilize specific forms of social relations while denying, even resisting, the dynamic nature of society.

The reactions against such conceptions represent one of the real strengths and contributions of what some refer to as postmodern thinking, that is, an emphasis on the vitality and importance of other cultures and values over and beyond hegemonic discourses, and of the need to generate political spaces for their articulation. In part, such conceptions underpin universal design or the viewpoint which states that environments should be sensitized to all users, that there is no such thing as stasis in the built form, and that flexible building designs should be utilized to permit people to transform the fabric of the places and spaces that they interact with(in). Others see such principles as being trans-generational while incorporating choice and alternatives into the built fabric. Indeed, as Davies and Lifchez (1987) note, accessibility is much more than admittance to a building or a matter of logistics but is also a quality of (socio-psychological) experiences which modernist ideas did little to acknowledge. They comment:

how one feels about a place, how one interprets it, or even whether one can adequately interpret it – these are all less quantifiable, but crucially important, aspects of accessibility. A place that supports people's activities and desires, permits them to be and do what they want, and causes them a minimum of pain, frustration, and embarrassment is more accessible than a place that confuses, harasses, or intimidates people. Many ostensibly accessible sites differ substantially in the quality of experience they offer. (p. 40)

Principles of design which reflect this wider conception of accessibility, while denying the stasis of the built form, are evident in a number of places, and especially in the Netherlands, Germany and France where a range of housing schemes have been developed with the objective of being adaptable to social change (see Daunt, 1991). Weisman (1992), for instance, cites the example of Stichting Architectin Research (SAR), a Dutch-based approach towards housing design premised on the idea that a dwelling represents much more than a physical entity but is a 'human act'. As Weisman recounts, the future tenants of SAR schemes are involved in designing their own living spaces and, in one instance, a family living in one of the housing schemes were allowed to lower the windowsills in their living area to provide their father with a view from his wheelchair. Likewise, one example of accessibility being wholly incorporated into a new building is the APL building situated in downtown Oakland in California. As Figure 9.2 indicates, accessibility for wheelchair users has been designed-in to the front entrance, yet, as the person responsible for access compliance commented,

at the time of the original plans, the architects were insisting that the look of the building would be compromised by the front entrance access ways we were insisting on. They wanted it all in a side entrance and they see this as good enough but our attitude is that people with disabilities have the same rights as everyone else to go through the front door! (Gertner, 1994)
Figure 9.2 The APL Building in Oakland, California is a design success for disabled people. The pavement approaching the building has a deep pink colour to permit vision-impaired people to differentiate between the line of pavement going past the building and that directing individuals into the building. Entrances are also wide, with shallow gradients and well-positioned grab rails.

The conflict, in this instance, was the issue of the aesthetic versus the humane, of facilitating access for all types of persons, or prioritizing particular design aesthetics which, so APL claimed, were a necessity to the 'corporate image'. Yet, as Gertner (1994) argued, 'to see the two issues as separate, or in the way APL was presenting it, was crazy... they've still got their image and we've got some access'. While all built forms are, to a certain extent, fixed, the APL building is interesting as an example of a design with removable internal walls and floors, while it incorporates induction loops and other technologies to facilitate movement around the building for different types of people with disabilities. However, its production occurred within the hierarchical relations of a corporate sponsor and a commissioned architectural practice and, as a range of researchers have noted, how far it is possible to produce sensitized design in a context where the social relations of building production are largely removed from democratic control and popular involvement (Davies and Lifchez, 1987)? As Davies and Lifchez (1987) have questioned, 'how ethical is it to practice architecture, to be a professional licensed to design buildings, without having first developed an intellectual and emotional understanding of people' (p. 35)? In this sense, Davies and Lifchez (1987) suggest that architects need to confront the social psychological context of design, of how it feels for the users and to acknowledge that there are no simple technical (design) solutions.

As O'Neil (1995) has argued, part of the problem of estrangement more broadly is related to the professionalization of a whole range of social activities, so maximizing the bureaucratic ethos and undermining the civic competence that many feel is a prerequisite of democracy. In this sense one way of returning knowledge and competence to the wider community is, as O'Neil (1995) argues, to institutionalize the 'transferability and thereby accountability of expert knowledge in order to raise the level of the well informed citizen or the need to create a pedagogy that will subordinate expert knowledge to the needs of political democracy' (p. 170). This, then, is one example of what Oliver (1992b) terms reciprocity, or a situation whereby the role of the architect is to be an enabler and educator rather than preacher or provider, with the resources of the design industry being placed at the disposal of local communities. Thus, to empower people with disabilities in the design process is a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, process which, as a minimum, requires an engagement at the level of values and ideology,
as well as the material base of building processes. Indeed, as Knesl (1984) notes, one needs to rethink radically the ‘relationships between both the architect and the client and between the architect and the process of designing a building’ (p. 4).

However, much more needs to be done in creating accessible environments, and, since the early 1980s, Western governments have increasingly acceded to the idea that inaccessible spaces and places in the built environment require some redress through the context of public policy. This is reflected, in the UK, by the emergence of new institutional fora for the development of access policies for disabled people while, in the USA, the drive towards barrier-free environments has been a staple part of institutional life since 1968. Likewise, in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and Sweden, significant policies and programmes, aimed at creating accessible places for people with disabilities, have been an important part of their welfare states, yet most, if not all, responses have been piecemeal, ad hoc, and poorly resourced, while tending to be an add-on to social welfare policies rather than an integral and integrative part of them. Even at the supranational, European Union, level, the emergent policy frameworks have tended to emphasize socio-technical solutions towards access, as though a transformation in design, in and of itself, will provide the singular mechanism for overturning disabling environments.

That access policies and programmes should exist at all, however, is a recognition of the hostile and oppressive nature of the built environment, and, as Barnes (1991b) suggests, people with disabilities have made some gains in recent times. Such gains, particularly in the UK context, are encapsulated in a range of legislation which specifies that ‘reasonable provision’ should be made for disabled people’s access while, since the late 1970s, systems of professional advocacy and representation have emerged as the state’s response towards correcting the seeming powerlessness of disabled people and their exclusion from debates about the built environment (Oliver, 1990). In turn this has generated what one might term an ‘access industry’, with access officers and committees springing up all over the UK, co-ordinated, and orchestrated, by national access organizations. Yet the overwhelming impression is that the plethora of policies and programmes for access, particularly in the UK, are doing little more than reflecting and reproducing elements of state welfarism, the idea that what people with disabilities are receiving (yet again) is another form of government benefit (and, so some would say, a ‘handout’). In this sense the position and status of architects, design professionals and others involved in the production of the built environment is little changed (see Imrie, 1996, ch. 5, for an extension of such debates).

Conclusions

As Davies and Lifchez (1987) have argued, access should not be viewed as a constraint on architectural design but should be conceived of as a ‘major perceptual orientation to humanity’ (p. 49). In this sense a range of authors note that design professionals increasingly need to reject the idea that there are technical solutions to socio-political problems, that there needs to be some kind of deconstruction of the ideological constructs that underpin the aesthetic ideals of design. Indeed many writers concur that there can never be a socially sensitive or just architecture given the present structural underpinnings of architectural practices (Knesl, 1984; Knox, 1987). As Crawford (1992) concludes, ‘the restricted practices and discourse of the profession have reduced the scope of architecture to two equally unpromising polarities: compromised practice or esoteric philosophies of inaction’ (p. 41). Yet, as Crawford suggests, such an impasse need not necessarily prevent architects from reconnecting their practices to social and economic questions, to issues, for instance, relating to the elderly, poor, people with disabilities, and the homeless. Unfortunately one still waits for such connections to be made.

Yet others are more optimistic in seeing the seeds of liberating environments and of the possibilities for non-ableist architectural practices. Hayden (1981), for instance, considers the elements of a transformative agenda which would challenge the socially oppressive nature of much past and contemporary architecture. She calls for a ‘new paradigm of the home, the neighbourhood, and the city’, one which describes, as a first step, the ‘physical, social, and economic design of human settlements that could support, rather than restrict, activities of people with disabilities’ (p. 7). Likewise Weisman (1992) locates the problematical aspects of access, of exclusion and segregation, in the comprehensive system of social oppression, not, as he puts it, the consequences of failed architecture or prejudiced architects. This is a crucial point because, in conceptual terms, it situates the actions and practices of agents and institutions in a wider framework of social
structures, values and ideologies and avoids a reductionism which posits that people and/or institutions are somehow, independently, to blame for the perpetuation of disablist environments.

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Further reading


10

Enabling Identity: Disability, Self and Citizenship

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Disabled people in Britain face discrimination and prejudice throughout their lives (Barnes, 1991b). People who are disabled are portrayed as tragic victims of some unfortunate accident or disease, as people who do not function normally. This has a number of implications. First, non-disabled people's perceptions of disability are based on stereotypic beliefs about dependency and helplessness. This can result in the creation of a barrier induced by a fear of contamination, of physical or psychic damage. People who have an impairment can act as a reminder of our own frailty, our own susceptibility to morbidity and mortality (Shakespeare, 1994c). Second, the rise of 'consumer society' and 'consumer behaviour', the genesis of 'commodity culture' with its focus on the body (Falk, 1994), can create anxiety in those who do not conform to cultural and social norms. These reactions serve to remind the disabled person that they are 'different' even if they see themselves as normal. So Goffman writes: 'the standards he [sic] has incorporated from the wider society equip him to be intimately alive to what others see as his failures, inevitably causing him, if only for moments, to agree he does indeed fall short of what he really ought to be' (1968b, p. 7).

This chapter focuses on the effects of chronic illness on self and identity. The notions of the self, identity and identification have recently re-emerged as central themes in sociology and social theory. This has been driven, in part, by a critique of essentialist, Cartesian notions of ethnicity, sex, class and nationality combined with a growth in psychoanalytical theorizing, especially in feminism (Hall, 1996). It is a contested area, and definitions of self, identity and identification vary. Here self refers to how a person thinks of themselves, and identity refers to how a person is perceived by others (Ball, 1972). However, it is not suggested that self has an a priori existence: it is not a psychological or