

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Bess Williamson. *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design.* New York: NYU Press, 2019. 304 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4798-9409-3.

Reviewed by Elsbeth Bösl (Universität der Bundeswehr München)

Published on H-Disability (October, 2019)

Commissioned by Iain C. Hutchison (University of Glasgow)

Bess Williamson is an associate professor of art history, theory, and criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A historian of design, material culture, and arts by training, she received her PhD in American history from the University of Delaware with her thesis on the links between design and disability rights in the United States from 1945 to the present.

The primary topic of this book is the relations and interdependencies between politics, design, and social movements. The research objective explored is the advent, proliferation, and differentiation of accessible design. Williamson's concept of access in the context of disability is that architecture, infrastructure, and products be physically usable. Her analysis therefore concentrates on physical disabilities and so may perpetuate a dominant bias found in much disability history writing during the last decade. This is, however, not only a deliberative decision on methodology by the author, but reflects a feature of disability rights activism and is characteristic of the logic of accessible design where easily visible and comprehensible artifacts such as curbs and stairs have long been at the center of attention.

Williamson's analysis is shaped by a social-constructionist perspective. Access does not just happen and neither does disability: when activists, designers, experts, tinkerers, and users address everyday technologies and architectural features as either barriers or as accessible, they define disability as a phenomenon emerging from the material environment. This could be interpreted as the reason for disabilities, but also the key to inclusion. Williamson's stance on design is that it can be a device and vector for empowerment, but also for critique—by

designers who speak against their own profession, by disabled persons who protest at societal attitudes, by critics of access legislation and disability rights.

Apart from that, the political inscribes itself into artifacts and designs; they become politically charged. Thus they are both products of political contexts and factors that influence political discourse. It is intriguing to read how the notion of access has been weighed against other US ideals such as civic autonomy, capitalism, freedom, the rights of the individual, the free market, and individualism. Both advocates and opponents of accessible planning and building invoked such typically American ideals. Activists from the 1970s onward, for example, saw access legislation as a means to independent, self-determined lives. Opponents regarded federal and other legal regulations as a severe threat to autonomy, individualism, and independence. Some feared an interventionist state and a steered economy. Other opponents primarily attacked the costs of access and weighed the concerns of a perceived minority over the interests of the majority. This was not a question of money only, but also of rights and equality. Were a small number of disabled people to have greater rights than the many able-bodied people—and even at the expense of that majority mainstream? While there was always a strong belief that access should not place an additional financial burden on the public, reduce the functionality of the “normal,” or interfere with aesthetics, such calculations were particularly intense in the 1980s within the political climate of the Ronald Reagan (1911-2004) administration (1981-89).

The book also spells out nicely how closely the ideal, the politics, and the realities of access or non-access are

connected to categories such as race, social class, income level, and gender. Indeed, access may be even more about poverty than about disability. Throughout her book Williamson gives examples of how environments and architecture were manufactured around an ideal of male, white, able-bodied people—especially in designs by architects of the first phase of modernity such as Charles-Édouard Jeanneret Le Corbusier (1887–1965), or witnessed in streamlined vehicle design of the 1940s and 1950s. Such concepts and innovations were not created with disabled people in mind. However, this does not mean that disabled people did not embrace these developments. Access may have been limited, difficult, or risky, but people with disabilities have always been adept at finding ways to reach an accommodation with both the public and private environments with which they are confronted, even when many spaces remained inaccessible to them. However, as the author shows, they went to remarkable lengths to gain entry to these hostile environments and devised ingenious devices to achieve these goals. Many of these responses resulted in alterations and compromise solutions of last resort that today may appear to us as degrading practices—and many of them were—but they should also be recognized in the historiography as examples of very smart self-help.

While accessibility has been an important field of research within disability studies, historians of disability have only recently begun to look into the materiality and the meaning of technology, building, and design. This is especially true for the non-US context, while in the United States, Williamson's book is the third by a historian of design and material culture to appear within two years: Aimi Hamraie published *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* in 2017 and Elizabeth Guffey published *Designing Disability: Symbols, Space and Society* in 2018. From the point of view of a historian of both technology and disability, this new interest is a welcome development. All three authors make an important point about the differences between a normative concept, a policy statement, a template, and actual, individual user experiences. They combine to increase the presence of disability as a category in design history.

Williamson bases her study on archival material, periodicals and other published sources, and interviews conducted in the course of disability history projects. One chapter, for example, is based on interesting archive material from the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Collection at Berkeley. The author strives to take not just the perspective of planners, architects, bureaucrats, or experts of various kinds, but to embrace

those of users. However, individual disabled persons who were outside the architectural professions, and were not core figures in disability activism, are particularly dominant in the initial chapters, but they have little presence in the latter chapters where, sources permitting, it would have been nice to hear their voices continue with greater resonance.

The book is structured around seven chapters. Chapter 1 is about government policies and regulations in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the honoring and rehabilitation of disabled veterans was at the core of political interest. There were three major technical components to these policies: prosthetics were meant to complete the individual, customized cars were intended to take them to work and back, and accessible houses were to help reinforce US family and gender norms. It is very interesting to read that driving an automobile as a veteran was, in the postwar period, openly regarded as a material symbol of masculinity and freedom; it was advertised as such by car manufacturers and medical experts, even leading to a national car subsidy for veterans. However, despite provision of prosthetics, cars, and houses, the many barriers of the built environment faced by disabled veterans were largely ignored. Rehabilitation was regarded as the responsibility of the individual. Furthermore, high-tech prosthetics, wheelchair-accessible housing and specially equipped cars were components of an aid system limited to veterans. Disabled people who were not eligible for veterans' programs received much less attention, especially in the spheres of financial support and technical aids.

Chapter 2 focuses on the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign because this was the first university campus where, in the 1950s, wheelchair-accessible devices were installed. Williamson traces the creation of a coordinated set of ramps, curb cuts, and customized interior building. This first systematic intervention into the built environment was devised largely by Timothy Nugent, the university's rehabilitation services director. The chapter is about his and other rehabilitation experts' views on access: access was proposed as a means of medical and social rehabilitation and integration into the labor force and civil life. It was also rather enforced on people with disabilities. They were expected to perform, to be resourceful, well-disciplined, and tough. Access was not regarded as a right; it was given as a help so that the disabled individual could commit to his or her responsibility to function within society and overcome disability. Williamson calls this the rehabilitation approach to access. It was by no means a US phenomenon

but was also typical of 1950s and 1960s Europe. The 1961 *American National Standard Specifications for Making Buildings and Facilities Accessible, to, and Usable by, the Physically Handicapped* was to become the model for many European standardization attempts; clause 117.1 suggested measurements for access while maintaining that the problem was largely the person, not the environment, and that access should be realized without much cost or design change.

Chapter 3 is an innovative discussion, marvelously devoted to DIY approaches, to tinkering and homemade adaptations to gadgets, medical equipment, and tools. I like that the author puts emphasis on the role of DIY constructions and ingenious inventions by persons with disabilities and their families, these being exacted during the 1940s to 1960s before there was a public debate, special design interest, and advocacy action. The background story is one of US consumerism and white middle-class lifestyle ideals. Williamson's focus is on disabled veterans and polio survivors and their families. This is because these were the two groups of people with physical disabilities that dominated media coverage and received the most government attention in the postwar period. Williamson's account of DIY and self-help journals is a fascinating and engaging read. It is about resourcefulness, inventor spirit, and agency. Williamson also makes clear that while white middle-class veterans and polio survivors may have been a privileged group at the time, they were also under significant pressure. There was strong expectation that they should "achieve," meaning that they were supposed to operate "normally" in the spheres of consumerism and work, be independent and productive, fulfill mainstream gender roles, and keep their impaired condition private, ideally mimicking a nondisabled state. In an atmosphere of consumerism where consumption lay at the core of US civic identity, they could do this by shopping, having hobbies, and caring for their homes. However, mass-produced aids to achieve all these objectives were scarce and limited in variety. So there was a constant need for disabled people to be creative, to devise things independently. This matched well with a general trend towards DIY activities in these decades. Thus, tinkering to create access was both normal and normative, as well as extraordinary because adjusting to disability had an entirely different meaning to DIY undertaken for enjoyment or self-expression. It is important to note, too, that this kind of disabled peoples' approach to access had an entirely different nature from rehabilitation specialists' concepts of defining regulations and guidelines. The former was personal, experiential, imaginative, and local.

rential, imaginative, and local.

Chapter 4 shows how this latter type of knowledge, that of rehabilitation specialists, about barriers, access, and disability, became the reference base for the emancipation movement that emerged in the later 1960s and the 1970s. The movement promoted the new idea of a new type of expert: the disabled person as a specialist of disability. Experiential knowledge was now regarded as the most valuable type of knowledge and the rehabilitation specialists' and the authorities' take on disability and access was largely rejected by the movement. Williamson traces the advent of the new stakeholder and interest groups in accessible planning and building to the disabled student group that began the independent living movement at Berkeley. She then turns to the 1970s, when a nationwide emancipation movement was born. It quickly assumed the character of a civil rights movement—inspired by the boom in wider civil rights issues at that time. The concept of and the fight for access were at the core of the disability rights movement. Activists drew on individual experience and expertise and at the same time called for legislative action. In the wake of this, access became more and more a matter of standards and measurements. It was increasingly defined in quantitative terms.

Questions of scope and quantity are continued in chapter 5. It discusses how proponents and opponents of accessible design discussed the rights issue. These debates focused on calculating costs and benefits, and weighing the benefit of a perceived small group of people against the concerns of what seemed to be the majority. The 1973 Civil Rights Act addressed disability as a civil rights issue and thus access became a civil right by law. But was it worth the effort, or was accessible design still a design excess? Should communities afford this, and did they need it at all? Williamson uses the example of the public bus system to demonstrate how opponents of accessible design suggested the extension of individual transportation by, for example, dial-a-ride-taxis as an alternative; additionally, to them, taxis seemed less costly and more comfortable. The backdrop to those arguments was the conservative preference for privatization and for self-interested companies over federal programs or even legislation under the Reagan administration. Separation was preferred over integration while at the same time these opponents of access regulation asserted that disabled people gained more benefit from separate provision. While the disability protest movement of the 1980s grew ever stronger, it experienced a harsh backlash from conservatives. Williamson portrays the 1990 Americans

with Disabilities Act as a victory for the rights movement that made access enforceable, but she also points out that rights were increasingly quantified and the material objects in question remained the subject of heated debates.

Chapter 6 moves on to examining design principles and development from ergonomics to Universal Design. Before ergonomics, designers worked with highly standardized measurements and statistical averages that allowed for little variation. Ergonomics took variation as a starting point. In the meantime, disabled persons were increasingly regarded as consumers of the mass market. They began to be attractive to companies and access was increasingly defined by market logics. Williamson is critical of Ron Mace's 1980s concepts of Universal Design and Design for All, although these were very appealing at the time. The idea of design usable by all people and for everyone appears more inclusive at first glance than the design of special, add-on accessibility technologies. Universal Design, however, veils power and class issues, and "gloss[es] over disability in favor of aesthetic and functional appeals" (p. 150). The emphasis on "all" may easily conceal power relations and inequalities in society. Who might this "all" be, anyway?

Chapter 7 focuses on more recent developments in design and politics. Williamson contends that while accessible design is now ubiquitous and some features, such as ramps, are iconic, there is not much reason to feel celebratory. There is still a lot of resistance and ADA rights have to be pushed through by lawsuits. What is more, ramps and other devices of access are not the end of exclusion. She quotes an artist's bon mot of "beautiful progress to nowhere" to illustrate this (p. 186). The rights movement has made much progress, but to where, precisely? What has really changed? Williamson leaves this question unanswered, turning instead to discuss a new development in design, the concept that disability these days is made more visible and readable from the artifact. Prosthetics and devices take into account fashion and individual style preferences. It is interesting to read that disabled people branded their own design as "crip design," borrowing from crip culture. She also argues that disabled designers in general see and create things differently, inscribing their different experiences into their products. But maybe this chapter is a little

too enthusiastic about fashionable prosthetics design and chic wheelchairs. Obviously, those are great achievements, but such items are often only available to a user elite or even a few avant-garde users. Here the narrative appears rather teleological (design turning into the better) and misses out on power and income inequalities. Options for self-expression are still limited—maybe not by design, but certainly by financial resources. It is great that design is much more varied these days, but disabled persons' choices often are not independent. In her conclusion, Williamson touches on these limitations directly when she highlights recent curbs in disability rights and threats to financial aids under the Trump administration.

The author's overall political point is clear: access is not the same as inclusion. And access is not the same as ramps, door measurements, or variety of choice in prosthetics. Different needs and wishes have to be addressed by very different design approaches—if they can be addressed by design at all. For example, the realm of the sensory impaired asks for very different design approaches—light design, sound design, texture design, *et cetera*, all of which are quite different from issues of physical mobility.

Williamson treats access as an ideal, that is, something easy to understand but hard to reach. She demonstrates convincingly that the idea of a universally accessible world for all of us is both an illusion and not even what all disabled people want or need—particularly if access means the compulsion to function and behave "normally." Disability cuts through the mainstream ideas of functioning and participation. Not everyone needs or wants to function or do things the "normal" way even if this is possible with the help of a certain type of design. There needs to be room to live differently. This kind of choice, she argues, needs to be given greater respect.

To have shown such ambivalences and paradoxes is a merit of this investigation. Altogether, this book is easy to like. It is free of jargon. The many short summaries are very useful. They are placed either at the opening or at the end of each chapter. The contents of this book are a win for historians of disability as well as for historians of technology, architecture, and design. I certainly recommend it.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-disability>

Citation: Elsbeth Bösl. Review of Williamson, Bess, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design*. H-

Disability, H-Net Reviews. October, 2019.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53666>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.