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*The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes beyond Access* calls to question the centrality of access and accessibility in disability design. David Gissen opens his work with a provocative anecdote regarding bias, centering his embodied identity as a visibly disabled individual. Gissen recounts a talk about disability and architecture where comments and questions shifted fully to the topic of accessibility. He bemoans that “the expectations about what I and other disabled scholars and designers should examine are far too monolithic” (p. xii). He warns that disability should not be relegated to issues of access or accessibility alone. Instead, if we use disability as a lens of analysis in the field, we might benefit from “the contributions impairment brings to an understanding of being human” (p. xv). Gissen challenges us to hold a more expansive view of disability by synthesizing histories, theories, and practices in architecture and design that encompass “a more expansive spatial politics of impairment” (p. viii). He calls on disabled architects and designers to create an “architecture of disability” that considers more than accessibility.

Gissen offers a concise synthesis of architectural theory, history, and modern design choices. Comprising six chapters, *The Architecture of Disability* poses numerous questions in a short amount of space. In chapter 1, Gissen reviews modern access negotiations at historic monument sites, rewriting disability history into current debates. Chapter 2 considers the concept of “wilderness” and the theoretical relationship between impairment and nature. Chapter 3 focuses on urban centers, reviewing city design and urban planning paradigms along with their purported claims about health, capacity, and human functionality. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are more theoretical in nature, covering concepts like form, aesthetics, environment, and tectonics. Across all of these chapters, Gissen uses a critical disability lens to discuss how architecture and design rhetoric, theory, and practices connect back to disability.
Gissen engages with readers most effectively in chapters where he weaves together theory, history, modern examples, and embodied experiences. In chapter 1, for example, Gissen reviews access demands pertaining to national heritage site monuments such as the Acropolis or the Basilica of St. Denis. Over the course of the chapter, Gissen unpacks a complex history of aesthetic choices made by conservationists, preservationists, activists, and local governments. In the case of the Acropolis, Gissen details modern debates over wheelchair access to the top of the monument. He claims these drawn-out debates “elide actual historical connections between impairment and these sites” (p. 6). The original Acropolis, he notes, was built for the purpose of pilgrimage. The site included interconnected ramps leading from the Agora up to the temple, designed for those with physical limitations to offer their prayers at the shrine of Asclepius. Gissen argues that the Acropolis and the Basilica of St. Denis were both informed by “cultures of impairment” that have since been forgotten or dismissed as inauthentic (p. 13).

Gissen convincingly argues that inaccessibility is designed into these spaces by modern architects. He argues that modern restoration practices often erase histories of impairment at large—ignoring both ancient and more recent disability histories. At the Acropolis, for example, government officials sanctioned the forced removal and murder of Ottoman occupants inhabiting the site, using demands for restoration to sanctify violence. Gissen explains that modern accessibility debates turn attention away from disability histories (past and present) and distract from more complex debates about preservation, disability, and human rights. Further into the chapter, he considers what it would look like to center disabled individuals in preservation and interpretation practices. What would it look like to rebuild the original set of ramps from the Agora to the Acropolis? What might it add to our experience of art and architecture if those with sensory impairments interpreted museum holdings? How might we learn more about the human experience by centering disability? Gissen’s careful weaving of historical, cultural, political, and theoretical concepts, tethered to real-world examples and visions of the future, offers a compelling argument for a shift in practices.

Gissen moves from monuments to broader concepts of nature and the city in chapters 2 and 3. He considers the ways in which urban planning erased signs of impairment across cityscapes. From the design aesthetics of “healthy cities” to the flow of people and money through these spaces, disabled people were designed out of public spaces. Reviewing choices in urban forestry, public health, and even animal husbandry, Gissen warns that we “come dangerously close to a form of naturalism that eliminates the concept of infirmity as an aspect of the future fabric of natural history” (p. 39). At the same time, city infrastructure and aesthetics create circulatory patterns of waste, water, and people that supposedly protect the city from disability, but also have the potential to entrench disablement. In chapter 3, Gissen argues that disabled people are alienated from public spaces, a pattern that cuts across race, gender, and class lines, targeting minority peoples broadly. Gissen continues this line of thought, questioning whose comfort is prioritized not only in cities, but across individual architectural constructs, in chapter 5.

After reading this book, I am convinced that disability architecture is about more than just access and accessibility. Gissen’s thoughtful engagement with theory and history alike clearly demonstrates deficits in the field, outlining how ableism bleeds into just about every practice and principle. However, I could not always envision what architecture might look like after this paradigm shift. In chapter 1, Gissen clearly lays out what disabled designers, art historians, and architects might offer us by using their embodied experiences in artistic interpretation. However, the following
chapters rarely guide the reader to imagine concrete practices in an “architecture of disability.” The deficiencies of current theories and practices are clear, but how we might teach, embody, and embrace an architecture of disability remains vague. While Gissen writes that this book is a “manifesto, guide, and rallying point” (p. xviii), I found myself frequently asking, “Now what?” Perhaps, though, reimagining requires a collective effort from a wide range of disabled perspectives.

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