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Access

Bess Williamson

Williamson, Bess. (2015) "Access." In R. Adams, B. Reiss, & D. Serlin, *Keywords for Disability Studies*, pp 14–17. NYU Press.

The noun form of the word “access”—meaning “the power, opportunity, permission, or right to come near or into contact with someone or something”—first appears in published texts in English as early as the 1300s. It has been used to characterize the relationship between the disabled body and the physical environment since the middle to late twentieth century. More specifically, it refers to efforts—most prominent in the United States—to reform architecture and technology to address diverse human abilities.

In its most literal form, “access” describes the ability to enter into, move about within, and operate the facilities of a site, and is associated with architectural features and technologies, including wheelchair ramps, widened toilet stalls, lever-shaped door-handles, Braille lettering, and closed-caption video. Figuratively, however, it can suggest a much broader set of meanings linked to a more inclusive society with greater opportunities for social and political participation. Given these technical and metaphoric interpretations, the push for access has yielded some contradictory results. While improved public infrastructure has been a major success of the disability rights movement of the last half century, technical change does not necessarily translate to the deeper goals of openness, inclusion, or opportunity. In fact, in some cases technical compliance can replace and even obscure the movement’s broader goals of social, political, and economic integration.

Though “access” and its corresponding adjective “accessible” have distinct meanings in relation to disability rights, both terms convey broader arguments about rights and opportunities. Discussions of social and economic justice often refer to an ideal of access: “access to jobs,” “access to housing,” “access to health care,” and so forth. These expressions convey the importance of recognizing external barriers that prevent disenfranchised persons from gaining access to resources. They exist in contrast to debates over inherent or biological inequality, such as sexist or racist arguments that view women or nonwhites as physically and mentally incapable of equality. A focus on access is a shift away from attempts to fix or cure disability on an individual level, and toward an emphasis on social or legal interventions. Access implies social potential not dependent on correcting the disabled body, but instead made possible through institutional and material change.

In the history of disability rights, the concept of access linked disabled people’s material struggles with other civil rights causes. In debates over the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared that “all members of the public should have equal access to facilities open to the public” (tenBroek 1966, 849). The disability rights movement emerging in the same period interpreted this language for its own cause. The legal scholar Jacobus tenBroek wrote in 1966 of a “right to be in the world,” rooting the rights of the disabled in core principles of citizenship. Barriers to free mobility, tenBroek wrote, violated a “basic sense of the right not to be unjustly or causelessly confined,” a right he traced to the Magna Carta and major Western constitutions (848). Legal advocates Marcia and Robert Burgdorf similarly linked “access” to core American rights. “Free access to public buildings and transportation systems,” they wrote in 1975, was a key component

of disabled persons’ rights to equal protection under the law (Burgdorf and Burgdorf 1975, 855–866).

Access holds the curious distinction of being seemingly easy to define and comprehend but difficult to create. As early as the 1960s, for instance, building codes in the United States defined access in clear, specific terms. Local regulations mandated such features as wheelchair ramps of less than 1:12-foot rise; doorways of at least thirty-two inches in width; and grab bars in toilets (*American National Standard Specifications* 1961). The difference between the ideal and the real, however, often proved significant. The first national law that addressed access, the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, required that architects design or renovate buildings purchased and leased by the U.S. government “to insure whenever possible that physically handicapped persons will have ready access to, and use of, such buildings.” The phrase “ready access” suggested the possibility of a site’s availability to any given disabled person. In reality, the components of legal compliance were often piecemeal and failed to add up to overall improvements in usability. Early regulations applied to specific buildings, so a courthouse or hospital might be technically accessible, but without sidewalks, curb cuts, or usable public transportation, actually getting to and into the building remained difficult for many. Even in the present day, compliance with the law can be fleeting when building tenants or managers leave elevators or ramps locked, allow accessible features to fall into disrepair, or obstruct spaces and passageways.

The demand for improved access follows the logic of the “social model” of disability, which shifts attention from the impaired body to the surrounding environment. Early advocates used the term in a very literal way, evaluating sites and products in terms of their function for people with physical and sensory limitations. The

category “accessible” delineated the reachable from the unreachable: ramped entrances and clear pathways from stairs and cramped passages. In technical guides and government policies, “accessibility” and “usability” often appeared with the related term “barrier-free.” If “access” was the outcome of diligent planning, “barriers” were the existing conditions, often characterized as needless or “thoughtless” obstacles. These analyses of “access” and “barriers” pointed to problems and solutions in the physical environment, not fixes for the individual body. Disability activists likewise point to architecture as an external barrier that prevents people otherwise willing and able to participate in society from doing so. In a 1990 transportation protest, a black disabled man taped a sign to the back of his wheelchair stating, “I can’t even get to the back of the bus,” linking lack of physical access to the history of racial segregation (“Civil Rights, Disability Rights”). In a number of protest actions—including the occasion of a 2004 Supreme Court ruling on disability discrimination lawsuits—wheelchair users left their chairs at the bases of grand staircases to government buildings and crawled up the steps (Shapiro 2004). These actions perform the argument that it is not physical inability but the absence of architectural accommodation that keeps people with disabilities excluded from the public spaces identified with civic life.

While the most extensive requirements for access mandated by law originated in the United States, access has proven a powerful concept in disability rights discourse on a global level. Architectural access is now included in civil rights legislation in Australia, the United Kingdom, South Africa, and the province of Ontario, Canada. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified in 2008, requires signatory nations to provide “reasonable accommodation,” including technological and architectural access.

Still, the American model of building ramps, expanding doorways, and installing technologies to improve access does not translate immediately to global contexts, particularly for areas without extensive paved roads or centralized transit infrastructure. Furthermore, in a human rights framework accessibility can describe not only the concerns of those considered “disabled” but also those of women, children, migrants, and others who experience constraints of movement and expression (Meekosha and Dowse 1998). Attention to access, therefore, proves most powerful when interpreted broadly, bringing notice to mobility and communication barriers that may not be as tangible as sidewalk curbs and public announcement systems.

Mandates requiring accessibility remain fraught even after decades of legal battles and new legislation governing arenas ranging from private offices to online shopping. At stake in these debates are core American and Western values of individual and social citizenship. Rights discourse often centers on the value of “independence”—that is, being able to move about and do things on one’s own, without the assistance of doctors, nurses, parents, or charitable strangers. The ideal of an accessible public environment follows this conception of citizenship as autonomy. And yet, in practice, claiming the rights to autonomy through accommodation can be interpreted as a neoliberal critique of the welfare state, which fosters the notion that individualism and independence are prerequisites for good citizenship. The late historian Paul Longmore details the “ceremonies of social degradation” that accompany social welfare and other entitlements, inculcated in endless paperwork and bureaucratized misdirection (2003, 240). Access, too, comes with its rituals of shame as in cases when disabled citizens must pursue legal action to demand usable workplaces or accommodating schedules, leading to frequent accusations of fraud

moneygrubbing, or selfishness. Lennard Davis describes the sense, rooted in modern psychological theory, of disability as a form of narcissism, and the demands for accommodation as “self-concern rather than a societal concern” (2002, 124).

In recent years, some scholars and activists have questioned the centrality of access to the mainstream disability rights agenda. While the principle of access seems infinitely expandable, it often narrows to discussions of architectural details such as stairs and ramps. The International Symbol of Access—the white figure in a wheelchair against a blue background—seems to exemplify the problem of representing disability solely in terms of mobility impairments, and access solely in terms of wheelchair access. It centers the ideal of access on overcoming the realities of barriers. While few would question the importance of establishing and enforcing architectural access, these laws also show some of the limitations of technological interventions in a neoliberal political economy. Access can represent a form of outsourcing, as authorities implement technological change without addressing underlying prejudices and misconceptions. As disability advocates shift their rhetoric, they urge a look “beyond ramps” and emphasize those disabilities (including psychological and intellectual concerns) for which accommodation may not take tangible form (Russell 1998).