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DAVID GISSEN, *THE ARCHITECTURE OF DISABILITY: BUILDINGS, CITIES, AND LANDSCAPES BEYOND ACCESS*, UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, MINNEAPOLIS; LONDON, 2023.

Since the 1970s, disability activists and scholars have vigorously contested architecture as an inhospitable discipline. Yet impairment, as a fundamental human condition, has shaped the built environment for thousands of years. As the architectural historian, theorist, and practitioner David Gissen writes in *The Architecture of Disability*, even the ascent to the Acropolis in ancient Greece (when it was likely enabled by a continuous ramp), would have been considered from the vantage point of blind, elderly, or pregnant people. It would, however, be politically insufficient to draw lessons from such past practices only to make historic monuments and other spaces more “accessible” for disabled people. As Gissen consistently reminds the reader of his book, access is a flawed category, limited by our modern (and capitalistic) orientation towards efficient use and normative function. Rather, to read impairment (as well as weakness, incapacity, and dysfunction) back into architecture—where it has always been—is to fundamentally redefine “its character and ultimate intent.”¹ This is because “architecture alienates disabled people beyond the utility of it.”²

In this thought-provoking yet digestible book, disability sets up a *structural* disciplinary critique which offers for Gissen “opportunities for alliances among those seeking to reimagine the politics of architecture and its engagement with human subjectivity and rights.”³ A multivalent engagement with subjectivity here is crucial, and on the methodological

¹ D. Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability*, p. xvi.

² *Ibid.*, p. ix.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

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level Gissen implements it through an equally multivalent first-person subject in various evidentiary and argumentative registers. This begins in the introduction's first page, which situates a straightforward critique of techniques for architectural "accessibility" as "ultimately belittling of disabled people like me."⁴ The strategic insertion of personhood here and throughout the book moves beyond the ethnographic approaches by disability and built environment scholars such as Raymond Lifchez, whom Gissen references. Yet such passages (e.g. "it is difficult to imagine this book with my own experience of this path..."⁵) should be understood less as acts of centering the author himself, but to suggest that "people like me" are both highly individuated in their experience of the built environment and therefore also highly differentiated from each other. "*People like me*" becomes a form of collectivization that projects into the political, physical, and cognitive experiences of other disabled people, but also, in a more intentional way, disabled architects and commentators of the built environment. This expansion of individual impairment into a matter of collective attention is politically operative for the book.

Impairment is distinguished from disability in that the former concerns a factual "lack" (a missing limb or a defective mechanism) while the latter presumes a disadvantage and is therefore socially constructed. As the media scholar Jonathan Sterne wrote in *Diminished Faculties: A Political Phenomenology of Impairment* (2021), impairment is not necessarily a limitation, but a basic sociotechnical condition of everyday life (a bus that arrives late, a skilled dancer who trips). Gissen motivates a similar normalization of impairment in six chapters, each of which identifies impairment in a single architectural meta-category: monument, nature, city, form, environment, and construction. The chapters are "accessible" in that they are short, clearly written, and assemble a wide range of references that, the reader surmises, are linked to the author's personal experiences, either as a scholar, architect, professor, or person in the world. Gissen's explorations are unconcerned with the type of in-depth case study that readers might expect in today's conventionally "rigorous" architectural histories, which cover a narrow historical period. Instead, Gissen liberally employs transhistorical analysis and comparisons, revisiting the theory and practice of modern architecture (especially in Europe and North America), which, because of their unilateral orientation

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. vii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

towards function, have excluded non-normative experiences and therefore calcified a hegemonic discipline that limits possibilities for collective liberation.

The book's first three chapters are connected by the latency of impairment in a larger scale of historical and spatial experience, of monuments, nature, and cities. In the first chapter, monuments such as the Acropolis and the basilica of St-Denis are vehicles for questioning the relationship between authenticity, originality, and disability in preservation discourse. Preservation techniques and procedures are evaluated for their role in monumentalizing history, that is, eliminating "weakness and vulnerability as cultural values" that have always been present in human settlements.⁶ In the second chapter, Gissen strings the artificial "wilderness" of Yosemite to the urban natures of early twentieth-century garden cities and beyond to reconsider assumptions about nature's purity and utility, which leave little room for understanding its inherent ugliness and impairment. For Gissen, environmental ethics is a lens for the valuation of humanity in its fullness rather than its usability. In the third chapter, the historical association of modern planning and infrastructure with hyper-efficient ideas of circulation and development (as in subterranean engineered hydrology and the colonial dynamics of private property) lead to a radical new proposal for urbanism, where flows are slowed, altered, and interrupted.

What comes across lucidly in these first three chapters is an opposition to a rationalization paradigm, an iconoclasm that destabilizes assumptions about modern "expertise" in the fields of preservation, planning, and landscape design. To develop each chapter's iconoclastic proposal, Gissen balances a surprising scope of evidence: canonical texts from architectural history, primary visual sources such as Piranesi's etchings of the Roman Forum, scientific research, critical scholarship by the likes of Elizabeth Povinelli, insights from key events in disability activism (such as the smashing of concrete curbs in Denver, Colorado, in 1978), and contemporary design practice (for example, West 8's *Salon de Pinos* in Madrid, a designed allée of "impaired" pines supported by prosthetic stanchions). This eclectic tendency unbalances architecture to reorient it towards bigger questions about contemporary *values* in Western society. In this way, it also generates a different kind of "accessibility" of readership, where the values embedded in specific design fields become legible

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

for readers not implicated in these disciplines. Impairment becomes an operative system for new forms of transdisciplinary integration.

The next three chapters are more closely linked to architectural practice. In the fourth chapter (on form), Gissen elaborates a critique of formalism (bridging sources such as Elaine Scarry, Bernard Tschumi, Heinrich Wölfflin, and Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss) and considers how aesthetic knowledge created by different ways of sensing, including weakened senses, can dismantle racialized and hierarchical systems. In Chapter 5, Gissen skeptically interprets the architectural category “environment”, looking into its reliance on clinical and metaphorical understandings of human physiology. Here, Gissen substantiates a critique of the norms that endure in contemporary discussions of climate and comfort (including the ostensibly critical discourse of “postcomfort”) by incorporating observations about his own artificial limb, which requires him to seek out extra air movement to cool his body. The sixth and final chapter—on construction—leverages disabled labor to amend (Marxist) materialist critiques of production, which define human purpose through normative understandings of productivity. Gissen identifies settlements in Red Vienna constructed by wounded war veterans and widows after World War One (including a project designed by Adolf Loos). In these communities, the “meaning of work” is remade when the assumed *possibility* of impairment (via class precarity, danger, or injury) is seen not as a weakness but an elemental component of collective life.

With reference to its latter half, we can consider how the book performs a critique of contemporary scholarship through “disabled reading.” Expanding the idea of alt-text, Gissen introduces critical, narrative figure captions, which offer a parallel way of moving through the chapters. With these, Gissen seeks to “[embed] politics into experiments with text.”⁷ As a case in point, the book’s final figure is a close-up image of a brick wall whose caption reads: “The photograph shows the hand of Khadija McNair [a Black expert in African American heritage] pointing to a brick bearing the imprints of fingers and set into a larger brick wall. The imprints were left by the enslaved builders of Stagville Plantation in North Carolina, in the southeastern United States.” This salient narrative, which does not refer to disability as such and—just as importantly—does not feature in the chapter itself, raises interesting questions about the idea of “people like me,” which introduced this review. Here, the

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

reader understands that Gissen's concept of impairment fluidly bridges disability justice and racial justice, precisely because both demand un-disappearing the marks made by all types of people upon the historical built environment. Other figures, for example a photograph of the path leading up to the Acropolis (designed by Dimitris Pikionis in the 1950s), translate relatable experiences into a disciplinary and epistemological critique: "the narrow ramp produces the idea that knowledge is solitary and physically demanding."⁸ This "disabled reading" of images reinforces the intersubjective position that introduces the book.

What ultimately matters in the book is how the multivalent centering of "people like me" transposes Gissen's personhood into more complex questions concerning the production of architectural knowledge. Writing about his skepticism of the primacy of archives in supposedly "insightful" architectural scholarship, Gissen addresses the importance of "my comparative weaknesses and incapacities, and those of others, as parallel sources of knowledge."⁹ The book's political and historiographical objectives are thereby tangential to contemporary understandings of "decentered" and "decentralized" knowledge, as proposed in a recent book by Leandro Rodriguez Medina and Sandra Harding (*Decentralized Knowledges: Essays on Distributed Agency*, 2025), where processes of intellectual co-creation are understood to reposition and replace canonical knowledge. As they write, this can (but does not always) lead to a restructuring of political power towards counterhegemonic ends. Gissen's embedding of a collective "me" or "we" in *The Architecture of Disability* triggers related questions about the concentration and centralization of Western architectural knowledge via its "functionalist" foundations. In this way, the book's broad scope and breezy references to "canonical" moments in architectural theory and practice become that much more intentional. This not only distinguishes it from other important works on disability and the built environment, including Aimi Hamraie's *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (2017). Gissen's (gentle) sweeping rejection of architecture as such returns to a type of polemic that was more prominent in the postmodern period, for example in Robert Venturi's *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966), but is even more ambitious because of its explicit political and democratic intentions.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

In this epistemological decentering, the reader will note that Gissen concludes each chapter by positing possibilities for a radical departure from conventional spatial practice (a dark and gloomy city rather than a “solarized” one or landscape designs that require prosthetics) while stopping short of identifying a unique “theory” of praxis. As specific as they are, designed works are introduced in an unimposing and even noncommittal manner. While this open-endedness could be seen as a shortcoming, or a position of irresolution, the reader may instead interpret this as a refusal of the political centralization of architectural knowledge and an invitation to co-speculate with him. This is plainly stated in the coda, which introduces a secondary (or primary?) agenda, this time from the perspective of an architectural practitioner: “[T]he question should not be how does this book relate to practice, but how can we (you and I) re-imagine practice to relate it to those marginalized by it?”¹⁰ This shift to the reader themselves—the “you” and the “you and I”—mirrors the “modest” (and often collaborative) design projects produced by Gissen and discussed in the coda. The book ultimately offers a great deal of precision concerning its disability politics, in that architectural practice must not simply include more disabled voices but instead be fundamentally altered by a non-normative and relational understanding of spatial experience. Although Gissen does not aim to deliver a “philosophy” of knowledge or a specific theory of practice (as in the status quo of “universal design”), the book firmly repositions architecture’s speculative capacity in the space between “you and I,” whoever that “you” may be.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 140.