Aimi Hamraie Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability

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Aimi Hamraie's *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017) critically traces the Universal Design movement in the United States, from its diverse inceptions in the mid-20th century to its broad applications today. When first coined by disabled architect Ronald Mace in 1985, Universal Design sought to conceptualize decades' worth of disability theory and activism. It positioned disabled users as the knowers and makers of accessible environments, challenging the dominance of non-disabled experts in disability design. However, as Hamraie's research shows, the narrative of Universal Design is far from universal: *Building Access* maps Universal Design's emergence through specific and multiple locations, timepoints, political agendas, laws, policies, and technologies, challenging Universal Design's adaptations as it has travelled into the mainstream. *Building Access* asks who counts as universal among users; how (dis)ability intersects with race, class, age, and gender in the U.S.A.; and how epistemologies structure the bodies we normalize and the built worlds we inhabit.

Hamraie is assistant professor of Medicine, Health, & Society at Vanderbilt University. A self-described critical maker, Hamraie sites *Building Access* within what they term critical access studies: an emerging field that explores the common-sense ideologies underlying accessible design, including "a more inclusive world for everyone" (p. 3). *Building Access* thus critiques both access-knowledge—the "historical project of knowing and making access" (p. 5)—and the specifics of Universal Design. In a reflexive mode familiar within feminism(s), Hamraie writes of their own journey towards knowing-making:

> Nearly a decade ago, when I began traveling to [buildings based on the principles of Universal Design] and other spaces, I thought that I understood Universal Design. It was common sense, really: the world should be designed with all of us in mind. But as my bodymind came to inhabit some ways of sensing, perceiving, and moving through the world that are called "disability," traveling and taking up space came to mean very different things: not easy passage, but frictioned negotiations of access and privilege. (Hamraie 2017, pp. xiv–xiii)

These "frictioned negotiations" (p. xiii) are central to *Building Access*. The first part of the book focuses on the pre-history to Universal Design and the Americans with Disabilities Act 1990, showing how layers of epistemological privilege configured a "normate template" (p. 20) of the Western body. As Hamraie argues, this template's mythical dimensions have dictated our built environments through architecture and design. Hamraie's research stretches from da Vinci's famous 15th century Vitruvian Man, through 19th century anthropometric efforts to measure (and, in the scientific sense, discover) the 'statistically average' human body, to early-20th century eugenic artwork, military human factors research, and industrial ergonomic design. An ideological landscape where some bodies fit better than others emerges, according to historical and contextual imperatives. They fit better precisely because the world has been built in accordance with their assumed ordinariness. Those who "mis-fit"

(p. 201), in comparison, must be rehabilitated and made more productive, or, failing that, hidden from view. Hamraie describes how disability activists challenge these narratives in a multitude of ways, including through crip theory. But Hamraie also argues that as the disability rights movement gained political and legal momentum from the 1960's onward, accessible design was repackaged and reconceptualized as a common good—something which non-disabled people would benefit from equally, especially as they aged. This is where Hamraie's critical access approach is most striking: they demonstrate how embodied privilege (the taken-for-grantedness of seeing, hearing, reaching) protects its own ordinariness by co-opting (retelling, selling, circulating) the threads of disability narratives and designs in the name of *universal benefit*—reinstating the normate template and obscuring the markers of difference through which inequality slides.

Building Access takes an intersectional approach throughout. Although gendered disability is not a specific focus of the book, Hamraie critiques the notions of productivity assigned to disabled women. For example, 1950's–1970's accessible kitchen advertisements show how disabled women users were assumed to be white, middle-class housewives, whose rehabilitation lay within domestic domains. Race is strongly attended by Hamraie, and as they note, it is not until the 1980's and 90's that ethnically diverse women are included amongst representations of disabled users. Chapter 3, '*All Americans*,' examines how racial segregation affected black disabled Americans, such that their built environments were doubly restricted by racial and ableist prohibitions. Here, the notion of 'access for all' is troubled further, with Hamraie exploring the complex crossings and dissonances between civil rights and disability rights movements in the United States. In latter parts of the book, we learn how neoliberal imperatives have influenced Universal Design, as a plethora of disability marketing firms emerge to target both disabled and non-disabled consumers. With Universal Design's methodological solidification in the 2000's, *Building Access* raises questions of our futures, such as how to anticipate the needs of users with diverse "sensory or cognitive disabilities" (p. 248); how to resist neoliberal appropriations of crip theory and activism; and how to continue implementing "politicized and cultural understanding[s] of disabled people as resourceful, creative, nonnormative, and interdependent" (p. 100) into our knowledge systems.

Building Access contains over 80 images, and their unconventionality delighted me as a reader. Anthropometrical drawings, newspaper clippings, memos, pamphlets, design templates, prosthetic limb advertisements, and hand-written conference notes bring texture to Hamraie's argument. Hamraie lingers in dusty archives—attends to scraps of detail. In doing so, they demonstrate the scrappiness and multiplicity of access-knowledge, in its continual unfolding. My favorite photograph from *Building Access* is of a chunk of concrete, smashed by disability activists in Denver, 1978, in protest against the city's lack of curb-cuts for wheelchair users; exhibited by the National Museum of American History, it becomes, through Hamraie's telling, a powerful example of the "fights . . . deep strategies . . . [and] relations of force and domination" (Tamboukou 1999, p. 203) that can emerge from genealogies. Yet as Hamraie warns, "there remains an urgent need to remember that struggle and inequality are not historical artifacts displayed in museums as a reminder of the way that things used to be" (p. 259). *Building Access* contributes significantly to our understandings of these struggles, in their past and ongoing forms.

References

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