

## Book Review

Justin J.W. Powell

*Designing Disability: Symbols, Space and Society* by Elizabeth Guffey, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), ISBN 978-1-3500-0428-3, 240 pages, illustrated, black and white, paperback (\$26.95).

In her trail-blazing book, *Designing Disability: Symbols, Space and Society*, Elizabeth Guffey provides vital insights into decades of social and design processes that half a century ago produced the most ubiquitous symbol of disability—and accessibility—worldwide: the International Symbol of Access (ISA). Building on existing scholarship from a range of disciplines and on original historical research, this book reveals the origins and evolving (largely transatlantic) architectural and design discourse, and several moments of serendipity, that led to its creation. The ISA has since diffused to become part of the built environment in all corners of the world. The work is richly illustrated and charts the vitriolic debates, protest activities, and artistic interventions up to the contemporary era. Guffey thus weaves together activist and aesthetic perspectives into a tapestry of social and design history relating to disability and accessibility.

Structured in historical phases, the book's chapters progress across longer and shorter stretches through more than a century of wheelchair design, social and welfare policies and programs (mostly in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia), architectural standards, and symbols relating to barriers and accessibility measures. Guffey engages the reader in what is necessarily a multidisciplinary, multilevel investigation, with unexpected twists and turns.

On one level, the book focuses on the politics of high office. U.S. Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower permanently and temporarily used wheelchairs while in office, and their stories are sketched against the backdrop of a lack of

accessible government buildings in Washington, DC, also highlighting the social consensus to hide impairment for fear of stigmatization. The latter shifted only marginally by the visibility of disabled veterans. On another level, welfare state provisions in the United States, United Kingdom, and Scandinavia are discussed in light of progressive legislation and the persistent challenges of implementation of disability policy and access. At ground level, the significance of individuals devoted to universal design, writ large, becomes manifestly evident. Guffey recounts how, in U.S. universities, inspirational figures such as Timothy Nugent (at Illinois), Ron Mace (at North Carolina State), and Viktor Papanek (at Purdue, CalArts, and Kansas, among others), campus planners, and students designed and constructed new worlds on the drawing board and poured in concrete. Guffey follows design professionals, such as architect Selwyn Goldsmith in the United Kingdom, who was a strident arbiter of accessibility. Academic initiatives went hand-in-fist with advocacy activities in organizations as well as protest and artistic actions in the streets. Indeed, disability protests and cross-national organizing have repeatedly been necessary to secure disability rights and to raise general awareness of the attitudinal and structural barriers—institutionalized discrimination—that disabled people face daily. The long and bumpy road to universal design extends into the future.

International events (e.g., world expositions, and the Olympics and Paralympics) and organizations (e.g., Rehabilitation International), artistic inspiration, design competitions, and guerilla art interventions have been integral to this history of design development, revision, and critiques of various symbols of disability. Designing what would become the ISA was a convoluted process: Susanne Koefoed, a Danish design student whose sketch of a wheelchair won a design competition, and Karl Montan, leader of the Swedish Institute for the Handicapped who chaired the commission and added a head to Koefoed's sketch, were instrumental; international negotiations

and chance also played their part. The on-going questioning of the official ISA, especially, its “misfit” nature as an amalgam of technical aid and person, emphasizes the shift from invisibility to ubiquity of disability via social change and political activism as well as cultural representations—and the need for signs of identity. In the twenty-first century, newer design initiatives in the United States, such as Brendan Murphy’s or the Accessible Icon Project (developed by Sara Hendren and Brian Glenney), have challenged the official ISA with alternatives, revealing both persistence and change in understandings of disability and accessibility.

When integrated into signage, the ISA designates accessible spaces and facilities. If the ISA has become present in public buildings and spaces everywhere, cultural notions of disability and access remain understudied across the social sciences, with especially the Global South remaining a blank page. Research is needed to chart the diverse local interpretations that mirror shifts from exclusion to inclusion of disabled people, as the human rights revolution witnessed since the end of WWII continues but also suffers backlash even across the Global North. Paradoxically, this global icon refers simultaneously to disability, and its ameliorating factor, accessibility. The ambivalence and debates surrounding the ISA persist. Guffey emphasizes this ongoing struggle, focusing on proposed alternatives to the existing ISA, despite its codification in law and the need to conform to the guidelines of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO).

Universal design (and the universalizing social policies likely needed to support it) has yet to reduce the barriers in environments and in attitudes and to maximize the usefulness of products and services during the design stage. Meanwhile, identity formation processes are among the most positive aspects of the ISA. The icon’s influence and implementation extend far beyond marking access in the built environment. The current ISA has spread globally, and it now can be found wherever people move in physical

space, finding their way. The symbol testifies to the ongoing shift from exclusion, along a slow and winding road, to social inclusion and the full participation of disabled people.

Through her work, Guffey brings scholarship on the ISA to the next stage. She complements studies that chart the influence of disabled peoples’ organizations and of international organizations as they facilitated remarkable shifts in disability paradigms. Still, institutionalized discrimination abounds, and the ISA also marks that accessibility and universal design are far from achieved.

This historical work reconstructs a largely Western process and thus does not provide a complete global analysis of cultural notions of disability and accessibility or of ISA implementation and adjustment. It might be seen as complemented, then, by a current exhibition, “Viktor Papanek: The Politics of Design,” which includes contributions from Guffey herself. The exhibition extends the access discussion to the Global South and across further disciplines, rightfully expanding the dialogue about symbols of disability and enhancing access across broader contexts.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Matteo Kries, Amelie Klein, and Alison J. Clarke, eds., *Viktor Papanek: The Politics of Design* (Weil am Rhein, Germany: Vitra Design Museum, 2018), ISBN: 978-3-945852-26-2. The exhibition has been on view at Germany’s Vitra Design Museum (September 20, 2018–March 10, 2019) and at Barcelona Design Museum (October 20, 2019–February 2, 2020).