

# *The Icons of Access: From Exclusion to Inclusion*

Icons collected and words by *Justin J.W. Powell & Liat Ben-Moshe*

When integrated into signage, the international symbol of accessibility designates accessible spaces and facilities.<sup>a</sup> In just a few decades, this icon has become ubiquitous throughout the world, now seen in nearly every airport, parking lot and public space. The diverse local interpretations of the icon mirror the shift from exclusion to inclusion of disabled people in the human rights revolution witnessed since the end of WWII. The traditional icon displays a figure and a real life object. In so doing, the access icon unwittingly creates a cyborg (see Haraway 1991): the wheelchair and its human user become one. Paradoxically, this global icon refers simultaneously to disability, and its ameliorating factor, accessibility. Only recently has a new type of access icon developed, dissolving the cyborg as it features an active rider—asserting the primacy of personhood and participation.

The (wheelchair) mobility icon—and related icons for vision, hearing, and information access—have become among the most widely recognised representations of disability. The icons attest to early attempts to support wayfinding and communicate issues of physical access to places. Alongside disabled individuals themselves, these icons provide daily interactions with issues of accessibility and disability. In fact, in many countries, this icon is the most commonplace visual representation of disability, becoming virtually synonymous with it. Thus, its metaphorical importance far exceeds the marking of accessible spaces.

Traditional icons of access, today used in a tremendous range of locations to represent accessibility, have attained this global ubiquity through remarkably fast diffusion. These pictograms, which seeing people continuously encounter in everyday life, provide directions or instructions independent of written texts, thus are especially useful in culturally diverse, multi-lingual locations. Enhanced accessibility through the reduction of environmental barriers offers considerable benefits for wheelchair users, bicycle riders, parents with prams, and travelers with luggage alike. Universal design, or the creation of spaces and products that aim to serve all potential users instead of some mythic average man (see Preiser & Ostroff 2001), also promises sustainability far into the future of societies with increasing longevity and thus more disability.

By the late 1960s, a variety of access icons had begun proliferating to designate building constructions that eliminated physical barriers, largely in North America and Europe. Taken together, however, these did not abide by two cardinal rules of public signage, namely consistency and reduction (Bilak 2001). Among the forerunners engaging the ambition to communicate across cultures and linguistic boundaries was the organising committee for the Olympic Games.

The Olympic committee sought a system of pictograms to facilitate the movement of athletes and spectators from every country. If the search for an icon of access started during preparations for the international exhibition (Expo 67) held in Montréal, Otl Aicher's pictogram system for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich would set a new benchmark that every such event since has tried to match.



In 2008, the pictograms for both Olympic and Paralympic games met officially established international standards for public information symbols. The twenty sports pictograms for the Paralympic Games, designed by the Central Academy of Fine Arts, reflect the traditional calligraphy of Chinese seal script. These gave visitors to Beijing help in finding their way. Yet the problems of wayshowing (Møllerup 2006) and navigation are posed every day in the urban environment, not just every four years.

*“In 2008, the pictograms for both Olympic and Paralympic games met officially established international standards for public information symbols”*



Intent on establishing a global standard, New York-based Rehabilitation International partnered with the United Nations and the International Standards Organisation in Geneva to initiate a design competition to find an icon that could be applied consistently everywhere. The search began for a suitable symbol that would be identifiable from a reasonable distance, self-descriptive, simple and aesthetic, practical, and have no secondary meanings (Groce 2002). The aim was to replace the surfeit of local designs with an authorised international icon recognisable to travelers throughout the world.

The evolution of the resulting access icon shows a clear progression from social exclusion to inclusion. During the long first stage, of social exclusion, few if any barriers were recognised or removed. No icon was needed. During the short second stage, representations of wheelchairs were devised and deployed. Indeed, all symbols submitted to the international design competition were graphic representations of

wheelchairs or wheelchair users, indicating that access for this group, powerful in disability circles, was paramount. Many leaders in the disability rights movement worldwide have been wheelchair users and Rehabilitation International has focused on physical impairment since its founding in 1922. A clear majority of jury members voted for the design submitted by Danish design student Susanne Koefoed in 1968 (Goldsmith 1976).

Originally, the winning design included only a white outline of a wheelchair within a black square, which clearly represented a technical assistive device (see Watson & Woods 2005 on the history of wheelchair access). During committee discussion, however, an important modification was suggested and approved: A head was added to the icon, creating instead the white outline of a wheelchair *user* within a blue square, known today as the “international symbol of accessibility” and regulated by ISO 7001:1990 for public information symbols.

The modified icon, displaying a cyborg of wheelchair and person, not merely the assistive device, represents the third stage of development. While adding a head to this icon of access was an improvement, even this “revised” symbol has been increasingly criticised. The growing significance of participatory rights for disabled people demands a distinction between person and wheelchair, emphasising specific needs and accommodations. On-going cross-cultural research currently seeks to clarify whether the icon is primarily perceived as a person with a mobility impairment or rather the general concepts of disability and accessibility—and to expand the array of symbols beyond a wheelchair user. The differences between these connotations are crucial in evaluating the icon’s social and political significance and its utility in fulfilling its varied functions. As we travel down increasingly accessible pathways in communities that value diversity, the focus has shifted to access provided for persons that help to ensure their participation in all areas of life. Ideas of social inclusion have challenged the centrality of diagnosis and clinical treatment of individual deficits.

The symbol functions to communicate accessibility in the built environment, to indicate the presence of accommodations, such as elevators, and to designate who may legitimately use particular spaces, such as widened parking spaces near entrances or enlarged restrooms. The key function is to guide persons in finding their way to and within such spaces. Yet recognition, awareness, boundary drawing, and identity formation also result from the symbol’s myriad applications in built environments (see Ben-Moshe & Powell 2007). Indeed, today even Google uses the icon, transporting the access icon into the virtual world—for when you forget your password, are barred from accessing your account, and wish to regain access. But, the function of the access icon remains most closely tied to issues of navigation in real time and space.

Wayfinding refers to individuals’ orientation and the architectural, design, and signage elements that assist them in choosing their paths to desired destinations. People navigate urban areas by creating mental maps of space; signage is crucial, especially when we venture



#### Account Assistance

Type the characters you see in the picture below.

Versure

characters are not case-sensitive

Submit

forth beyond our own neighborhoods. In terms of access and the built environment, wayshowing refers to the social process of helping individuals to orient themselves in space (Møllerup 2006; see also Abdullah & Hübner 2006). The emphasis is on environmental characteristics and using signage, less on the individual's experience of navigation important in wayfinding. Analogously, recent shifts in disability theory and policy replace the focus on individuals with attention to disability's social and political aspects; the structures and cultures that lead to disablement. Indeed, the icon developed in the context of a nascent social-political models of disability, which emphasise not impairments and their treatment, but rather environmental and attitudinal factors and social policies as factors leading to disablement.

The access icon was conceptualised in an era in which advocates, architects, and policymakers had begun to recognise that disability can be reduced or eliminated without changing the individual. The symbol was designed as a way to standardise signage indicating accessible facilities. In the battle for increased access, the labeling of types of access is a necessary development, but the ultimate goal of universal design is to obviate the necessity for such devices by reconstructing environments to have the fewest possible barriers. Universal designs consider, from the beginning, the needs and abilities of the broadest possible range of (potential) users. Paradoxically, the access icon, chosen to represent this ideal of barrier-reduced architecture, was that of an assistive device for people with mobility impairments, with the consequence that the access icon signifies disablement as much as it signifies facilitated access.

The access icon not only directs individuals to accessible facilities, but also raises consciousness around accessibility, and establishes boundaries between those who are “legitimately” disabled, and thus eligible for services and accommodations, and those who are not. Awareness raising effects are crucial for any minority groups that assert their rights and specify their claims. Some may argue that the awareness raised is done with a negatively connoted tool, namely, an individual's needing specific adaptations to access particular spaces. Yet the existence of the access icon simultaneously testifies to attempts to facilitate disabled individuals' full participation in society. However, at the same time, this symbol often directs persons needing accommodations to “special,” often segregated, locations. If universal design ideals would have been carried out fully, we would have no need for such a symbol, because places and objects would have been designed, from the start, for a diverse population. Yet current urban planning is inscribed by a “design apartheid” where urban planners, architects and related officials are guilty of constructing spaces that exclude or segregate disabled people and prioritise the dominant values of the temporarily able-bodied community (Imrie 1996). This is exemplified in the “three sexes” signage that designates segregated toilet facilities for men, women, and wheelchair users (such as this one in Cascais, Portugal). In contrast, this new Australian sign, with Braille and roman text reading “unisex toilet”, also marks mobility impairment as a “sex” category, but without segregating the diversity of users—everyone benefits from an accessible restroom.

*“Recent shifts in disability theory and policy replace the focus on individuals with attention to disability's social and political aspects”*



Perhaps more than any other aspect, boundary drawing incites controversy and battles over who belongs and whether the symbol is an adequate representation. Given that the boundaries around the group that benefits from accessibility can never be drawn absolutely and are forever being (re-)negotiated, this function of the access icon will always be fraught with conflict, as it gives much power to those who plan spaces and regulate policies even when these decision-makers have insufficient experience or knowledge about disability and access needs.

At the same time, we must also address the environments given at present, acknowledge desirable changes completed, and suggest how access policies and practices can be achieved. Indeed, awareness-raising is positive in that sensitivity for issues of accessibility is crucial for all individuals as they age and will most likely be confronted with their own disability in the future (Zola 1982). This life course argument can be complemented with positions that put positive value on human variation and bio-diversity and call for inclusive environments and societies.

Importantly, many disability groups have already adapted the access icon for their own purposes to help them reach their goals, such as the disability activist organisation Not Dead Yet. This logotype, which serves as a pride symbol, emphasises the access icon's symbolic importance for disability activists as they achieve their goals, such as the passage of human rights and anti-discrimination legislation. It renders a marginalised community recognisable as it asserts positive feelings to replace the negative experiences of oppression and discrimination.

Such logotypes emphasise that graphical representations reduced to the essential pictorial outlines of the wheelchair (user), as the access icon depicts, are not only popular, but have also been modified for diverse purposes, as groups fight for inclusion. Thus, debate and dialogue about access icons reflects—and should refer to—the politics of disability representation, especially given the lack of democratically organised decision-making about such a key symbol of and for disabled people. In all kinds of political campaigns, the access icon is being used to attract voters, symbolising the enhanced power of the disability movement—on both sides of the political spectrum. In the 2008 American presidential campaign, Obama liberated the access icon with the torch of the Statue of Liberty. The access icon even served as the capital C in some campaign materials for contender John McCain. Yet these access icons, in which the person is clearly emphasised, still pay homage to the rigid structure of the original access icons.

The fourth stage in the access icon's evolution shows an active person using a wheelchair, taking advantage of accessible spaces. The icon's adaptation around the world will continue and as it does, the meaning of the symbol may become even less about physical access per se and more about participation and activities. For example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City features an access icon that reduces the wheelchair to a filigreed semicircle and instead foregrounds a self-propelling person.



Alternatively, as more access icons are developed and older models are renewed with shifting paradigms, technological advances, and universally designed environments, the need for such signage may recede. While it attempts to reduce disadvantages, the access icon may also be (ab)used to reinforce ableist beliefs about individual performances in particular situations. Until universal design (and the universalising social policies likely needed to support it) succeeds in reducing the barriers in environments and in attitudes and in maximising the usefulness of products and services during the design stage, identity formation processes are among the most positive aspects of the access icon.



As shown here, the icon's influence and implementation extend far beyond marking modifications to the built environment. Whether taken-for-granted, modified or critiqued, the current icon for access has spread around the globe, where it exists on doors, throughout buildings, and on the streets leading to them. It can now be found wherever people move in physical space, finding their way. The access icon testifies to the on-going shift from exclusion, along a slow and winding road, to social inclusion and full participation of disabled people.

## References

- Abdullah, R. & Hübner, P. (2006) *Pictograms, Icons & Signs*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Ben-Moshe, L. & Powell, J.J.W. (2007) 'Sign of our Times: Revis(it)ing the International Symbol of Access', *Disability & Society*, vol. 22, no. 5, pp. 489–505.
- Bilak, P. (2001) 'Stereotypes on the street', *icograda Email News* 41/01. <http://www.icograda.org>. London: International Council of Graphic Design Associations.
- Goldsmith, S. (1976) *Designing for the Disabled*, 3rd edition, London: RIBA Publications Ltd.
- Groce, N. (2002) *From Charity to Disability Rights: Global Initiatives of Rehabilitation International, 1922-2002*, New York: Rehabilitation International.
- Haraway, D.J. (1991) *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, New York: Routledge.
- Imrie, R. (1996) *Disability and the City: International Perspectives*, London: P. Chapman.
- Møllerup, P. (2006) *Wayshowing: A Guide to Environmental Signage Principles and Practices*, Baden, Switzerland: Lars Müller Publishers.
- Preiser, W. & Ostroff, E. (2001) *Universal Design Handbook*, New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Watson, N. & Woods, B. (2005) 'No Wheelchairs Beyond this Point: A Historical Examination of Wheelchair Access in the Twentieth Century in Britain and America', *Social Policy and Society*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 97-105.
- Zola, I.K. (1982) *Missing Pieces: A Chronicle of Living With a Disability*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

## (Endnotes)

a This contribution is based on the international research project "The International Symbol of Accessibility: Global Diffusion and Local Diversity" carried out by Liat Ben-Moshe at Syracuse University in New York and Justin J.W. Powell at the Social Science Research Center Berlin (WZB), Germany (see Ben-Moshe, L. & Powell, J.J.W. 2007). For an international exhibition, please submit access icons to [AccessSymbol@gmail.com](mailto:AccessSymbol@gmail.com)



*stimulus* → *respond*



icon

miss world / yoko ono / diane pernet / j turner / zeus

# Contents

## Literature

076  
Landscape as Icon in Contemporary Visual Culture  
Words by *Ola Wlusek*

084  
Line breaks: iconography <br>  
Words by *Phil Sawdon*

090  
The Icons of Access: From Exclusion to Inclusion  
Words by *Justin J.W. Powell & Liat Ben-Moshe*

096  
Eye Contact (Towards a Disavowal of the Iconic)  
Words by *Derek Horton*

## Fashion

018  
Everyone Must Stand Alone

040  
Eisbar

062  
Nichola

100  
Miss World

126  
Remy

## Music

056  
Yoko Ono  
Interview by *John Duran*

060  
The Rise And Fall Of The Pop Icon: A Brief History  
Words by *Jeremy Allen*

## Poetry

112  
Myth-information (*excerpt*)  
Words by *Christina Lovin*

117  
Assumptions of the Virgin  
Words by *Christina Lovin*

114-115  
Words by *Peter Hughes*

116  
Primal  
Words by *Stephen Mead*

117  
Torch Singer  
Words by *Christina Lovin*

118-121  
Visual poetry by *Dirk Kome*

122  
Words by *Andy Johnson*

124  
Zeus  
Words by *Benedicte Wilhelmsen*

125  
Bus Stop  
Words by *Derek Adams*

## Features

012  
Totem and Taboo  
Words by *Rose Cooper-Thorne*

016  
Gilles Peterson  
Words by *Jonna Dagliden*

034  
Whispers  
Diane Pernet  
Interview by *Jack Boulton*