

# Investigating disability and inclusive landscapes

Citizenship investigations can take many forms, as Rob Kitchin demonstrates. He presents activities designed to encourage students to consider the ways in which disabled people are geographically excluded, and suggests ways to be more inclusive.

The ideas of social justice and citizenship have been key themes in many aspects of human geography since the early 1970s. Broadly, social justice studies have examined the distribution of material goods and power between people in a society, asking whether such distributions are fair and just, and how that society might be re-arranged into a more just configuration. For example, David Harvey (1996) and David Smith (1994) have explored inequalities between people in cities in relation to housing conditions, poverty, and access to employment and services, the reasons why such inequalities exist, and how this uneven development might be addressed. Citizenship builds upon notions of justice, and concerns the civil and welfare rights a State's subjects can expect – in other words what rights you can expect as a citizen of a country. Traditionally, questions relating to social justice and citizenship in western societies, whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, fair or unfair, has been avoided within the school curriculum. However, ideas of inclusion now form part of the secondary school curriculum, and the programmes of study in citizenship at key stages 3 and 4 seek to encourage students to think about political, moral and social issues.

This article demonstrates how disabled people are often denied the same levels of citizenship, experiencing reduced levels of social justice in comparison to non-disabled people specifically by focusing on access to the built

environment. It can be argued that in many western countries, disabled access to the built environment is only partially legislated for, therefore there is only partial obligation to provide access. Consequently disabled people only have partial citizenship, i.e. they only have partial rights to move about towns and cities. As well as detailing some of the problems, this article also considers ways in which students as geographers might intervene and try to make their environment more inclusive.

## Disability, geography and exclusion

It is only since the mid-1990s that there has been a sustained attempt to start to map out the geographies of disability in relation to social justice, citizenship and exclusion (for an overview see Park *et al.*, 1998 and Kitchin 2000). Despite this late start, a number of different issues have been investigated (Figure 1), although each of these topics is still highly under-researched.

What each of these investigations has revealed is that disabled people, by and large, experience different geographies from non-disabled people. In many cases, this might be expected. For example, people with visual impairments perceive the geographic world differently from those with full sight and wheelchair users cannot, for practical reasons, travel through many wilderness areas. Problems arise, however, when disabled people experience different geographies through no fault of their own. For example, it is now commonly argued that if a wheelchair user cannot enter a building it is because the building is inappropriately designed, not because of their impairment. In other words, it is the geography – the way the built environment is designed and built – that excludes many disabled people from full access to the towns and cities they live in.

What the studies in Figure 1 reveal is that there are a variety of ways in which disabled people are discrimi-

- Planning process and urban design issues, e.g. examining (1) the ways in which the physical environment excludes disabled people by denying access to certain locations; (2) how to design environments that are accessible to disabled people.
- Experiences of living within urban and rural environments, e.g. asking disabled people about what it is like to live in a location and some of the issues that concern them.
- Transport and mobility, e.g. (1) examining how accessible transport is for disabled people; (2) measuring the spatial behaviour patterns of disabled people (how far disabled people travel, how frequently, and by what means).
- Access to labour markets and schooling, e.g. examining how accessible, in terms of infrastructure and attitudes, labour markets and schooling are to disabled people.
- Siting of mental health facilities, residents' reactions and the socio-economic effects, e.g. examining the effects (social and economic) of siting mental health facilities in a particular location.
- Mapping and spatial ecology of disability, e.g. constructing maps of where people with different impairments are located, and then seeing if there is any relationship with variables such as social conditions, pollution or environment type.
- Learning and communicating geographic information, e.g. examining how people with visual impairments remember and learn spatial concepts such as street layout, and the routes between locations either through direct experience, or through secondary media such as tactile maps.
- Cross-cultural comparisons, e.g. examining the relationship between geography and disability in different places, in relation to both actual provision and legislation.

Figure 1: Some of the disability issues that geographers have examined.

nated against in society, all of which lead to the production of very different geographies (Figure 2). The four points in Figure 2, indicate that there is an imbalance in how disabled people are perceived and treated. In other words, there is an imbalance in social justice and citizenship between disabled and non-disabled citizens.

## Access to the built environment

There are many ways in which the urban environment disables people. For example, it is common for pavements to have kerbs at crossings rather than pavement-cuts and tactile markings,

1. **Lack of access to power:** Disabled people are generally under-represented in political positions at all levels (local, regional, national and international) and therefore lack a platform to give their views and change society.
2. **Lack of access to social well-being:** Disabled people are generally over-represented in poor housing, denied access to private and public transport, and find it difficult to take part in 'mainstream' social activities such as visiting the pub or cinema through poor provision and weak laws.
3. **Lack of access to employment:** Disabled people are often excluded from the labour market through discriminatory practices and poor levels of mobility. Where they do gain access it is usually in marginal positions undertaking low-paid, low-skilled work often on a part-time basis. This denies many disabled people prosperity and wealth, and their associated power.
4. **Stigmatisation through media images:** Disabled people are often portrayed in the media as abnormal, 'freaks of nature' or charity 'cases'. This presents negative stereotypes that mean that many non-disabled people view and treat disabled people in unfair and discriminatory ways.

Figure 2: Four ways in which disabled people are discriminated against.

for cash machines to be placed too high for wheelchair users, and for places to be linked by inaccessible public transport (Figure 3). Even where there is provision for disabled people, it is often separate or different from non-disabled provision. For example, accessible public toilets are mostly separate from able-bodied toilets, and theatres and cinemas generally restrict wheelchair users to certain areas within the auditorium, usually towards the front or the sides. As a consequence, disabled people often encounter many more problems of mobility than non-disabled people.

All of the problems detailed above can be tackled with relative ease. For example, steps can be complimented with a ramp, cash machines can be placed lower, buildings can have lifts fitted, buses can be adapted, and so on. This reveals that the built environment is rarely 'natural' but is the product of people's values and actions. Indeed the built environment does not just occur – it is carefully planned. As such, if we wanted to make accessible environments, we could. The fact that environments are not accessible reveals important insights into how we, as a society, view and value disabled people. To geographers such as Rob Imrie (1996), inaccessible environments suggest that urban planning expresses a form of 'design apartheid' whereby planners, architects and building control officers are guilty of constructing environments which 'lock' disabled people out. This occurs, he suggests, because planners and architects are more interested in how a building looks or how it will be used by the majority of users, failing to consider the needs

of disabled people. Here, environments and buildings are designed as if all people are the same (non-disabled). He argues that those that build and shape the environments we live in need to rethink the ways in which places are designed in order to make society more inclusive.

### Investigating access

There are a number of ways in which the figures in this article can be used in the geography classroom. In the school buildings and grounds and for local fieldwork.

- Geography teachers can ask key stage 3/4 students to study the photographs shown in Figure 3. Small groups of students produce brief description of how, even in cases where kerbs have been lowered, the environment is still inaccessible to wheelchair users. This could be followed by a whole class discussion to clarify the issues. Students could then use this information and a simplified version of the access audit (Figure 4) to map accessible/inaccessible places for wheelchair users around the school buildings/grounds. They will need to decide on appropriate symbols and include a key on the map.
- Using the quotes in Figure 5 and a modified version of Figure 4, groups of key stage 3 or 4 students can make a second survey of the school grounds/buildings with the visually-impaired person in mind.
- Students could then suggest ways in which the school environment could be made more accessible for: a. wheelchair users, and b. the visually impaired.

The evidence could be presented either as a display, a presentation to the class or as a report to the headteacher.

- As a follow-up activity, groups of key stage 3 and 4 students can use these experiences as well as Figure 4 and large-scale maps, to gather evidence of accessibility and inaccessibility in an urban area (Figure 6). In the field, they should identify areas of good and bad practice, i.e. where kerbs are lowered, or where steps are painted in different colours. In this case the information gathered could be sent to the local planning office. The report could also take account of the views gathered from local people with disabilities, e.g. groups and/or individuals with specific needs. However, students should be instructed to respect people's privacy and/or anonymity at all times.

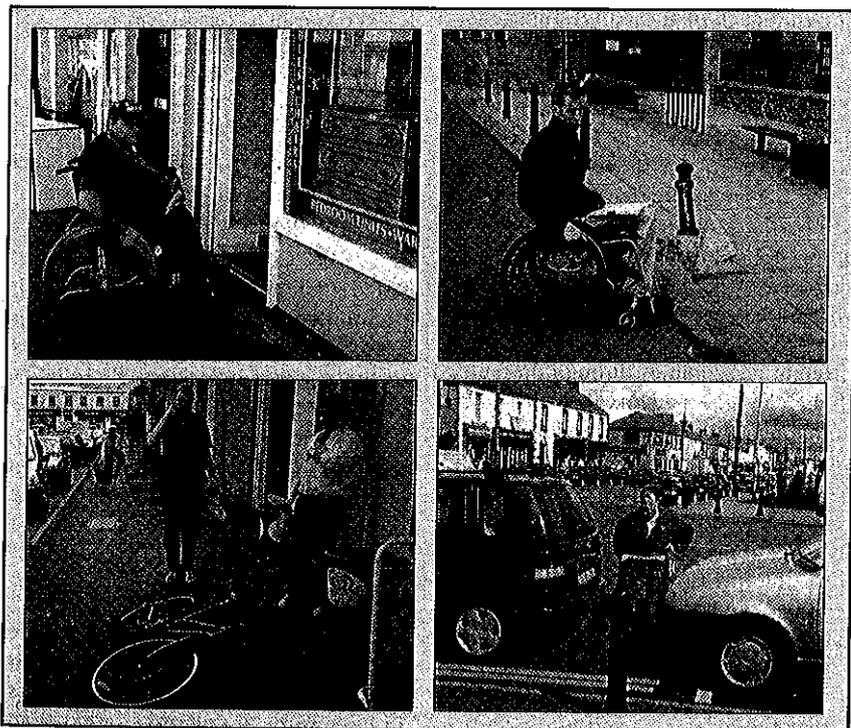


Figure 3: Examples of inaccessible environments. Photos: Rob Kitchin and Newbridge Access Group.

One way in which to find out how accessible an environment is, is to undertake an access audit. Take a walk around your local shopping centre and using the checklist below undertake an audit of:

- How many disabled people there are in relation to non-disabled people?
- How people with physical and sensory impairments would get to the shopping centre (e.g. is public transport accessible, are there disabled parking spaces)?
- How accessible the areas between the shops are for people with physical and sensory impairments (e.g. are there steps but no ramp, is there lots of street furniture)?
- How accessible, both from the street and once inside, the shops are to people with physical and sensory impairments (e.g. are the aisles wide enough for a wheelchair, are there lifts between floors)?
- How the shops provide for people with learning and developmental disabilities (e.g. are the visual signs easy to understand are items on sales colour coded)?
- How many specialised services are provided in the immediate area (e.g. is there a shop mobility scheme, are there accessible toilets)?

The checklist below should help you focus on specific areas.

#### Parking and approach:

- well signposted and easy-to-find car park
- designated car spaces for disabled people that are close to the building
- trained staff available to help disabled people (with signs to indicate so)
- accessible path from car park to buildings (e.g. dropped kerbs)
- user-friendly path for people with sensory impairments (e.g. tactile paving)
- obstacles (e.g. bollards/street furniture) highlighted by colour contrast and tactile surfaces

#### Entrances to buildings:

- provision of both steps and ramp
- hand-rails provided on both sides of steps/ramp
- doorbell can be reached by all
- audible/tactile/visible intercom
- easy-opening door
- level threshold across doorway
- door width sufficient to allow wheelchair access

#### Reception and facilities:

- appropriate height of reception desk
- adequate seating
- publicly accessible toilets
- map of site including levels of accessibility

#### Circulation areas:

- adequate directional signage (tactile as well as visual)
- corridors wide enough
- level fire exits
- suitable floor surface
- tactile paths/guides

#### Vertical circulation:

- lift large enough to accommodate wheelchair
- doors open wide enough
- appropriate height of control panel
- appropriate alarm/phone height
- audible and visible signage
- suitable dimensions of treads/insets of stairs
- hand-rails to both sides of stairs and in contrasting colours
- stair nosing (edge of step) of a contrasting colour

Source: Ewart, 1998.

If conducted as part of project work, photograph different environments and construct a poster documenting access in the shopping centre.

- What conclusions can you draw from your study?

Figure 4: Undertaking an access audit.

Other geographers, including myself (Kitchin, 1998), have considered the messages that these inaccessible environments communicate to disabled people. As Napolitano writes:

*'Good inclusive design will send positive messages to disabled people, messages which tell them: 'you are important'; 'we want you here'; and 'welcome' ... if the way that disabled people are expected to get into a*

*building is round the back, past the bins and through the kitchens, what does that message communicate? How will it make a disabled person feel?' (1995, p. 33).*

Here it is argued that the landscape is 'written' as a text, containing messages that we can read (see Cresswell, 1996 for an introduction). We have all been taught how to create and read such messages, whether it is being apprehen-

Very simple practical ideas are needed, such as larger signs and painting the edges of all steps.

Larger signs are needed. Street signs in most towns are either too high or too low to read.

They should paint the kerbs, that would help. Sometimes I fall off even with the cane. I've been knocked down twice ... Drivers don't realise even if you have a cane. They don't really care. It scared me a bit last time, I just lost the edge of the kerb.

Move lamp posts to one side of the pavement.

Painting a shop doorway would be good, like a yellow line by the door. I'm always walking into shop fronts looking for the door.

Tactile pavements need to be standardised and there need to be more of them.

We need consistency, they are not uniform. You can spot a white line on one set of steps and then take a tumble on the next. Positioning of signs needs to be better.

We need consistency in tactile markings at crossings and road junctions. They are good in some areas but they don't always end up at the pole with the button. Some go from the edge of the pavement to the inner shoreline, others just jut out into the path, so sometimes you can miss them.

Figure 5: Potential access solutions suggested by people with visual impairments. Source: Kitchin et al., 1998a, p. 43.



Below is an extract from Ben Elton's novel *Gridlock*. Read the extract and then answer the following questions:

1. How is Deborah portrayed in the passage?
2. What sorts of access problems does Deborah encounter?

Deborah [using a wheelchair because of a car accident] would come to realise that the only thing missing from doorways, steps, lifts, escalators, curbs, etc., in London, were neat signs saying Achtung! No Disabled People Allowed ... For Deborah, once a warm and vibrant human being, exuding personality and soul, had become a fire hazard. Fire hazard, and specifically a fire hazard. Not obstruction, embarrassment or damn nuisance, but fire hazard.

The reason Deborah was so specifically a fire hazard was that in those two little words, the abled bodied community let itself off the hook. It would of course be churlish to deny someone access to a theatre or pub because their chair would be difficult to get up a flight of steps, or because they might occupy more space than walking customers and hence are less profitable. On the other hand, to deny someone access because they are a fire hazard – well, there is a sensible and public spirited action. There is a fast route to the moral high ground if ever there was one ...

Should, Deborah, or anyone similarly afflicted, be so selfish as to complain about their effective ostracism from social and cultural life, what would she be doing but wishing pain or death upon the abled-bodied community. And let us face it, it is not their fault that she is in a wheelchair.

'It's the possibility of a panic that worries us' people would patiently explain to Deborah. 'You have to ask yourself what your situation would be in the case of a rush or stampede.'

Very occasionally Deborah attempted to argue her corner, pointless though she knew it to be.

'Listen bud,' she had said, as politely as she could manage, to the slightly punky young man who was refusing to sell her a

ticket to a play to be performed in an upstairs room of a pub ... It is Saturday afternoon OK? And I have just negotiated the entire length of Oxford Street. I dealt with it all; the tone deaf [idiot] playing two of the three chords of "Blowin' in the wind", who kindly had his guitar case full of five pence bits spread across half the pavement ... I have got around ten broken paving stones that the council kindly put there to trip up blind people and snag wheelchairs. I have avoided the 1.5 million tourists standing in groups wondering how they just managed to pay £5.00 for a can of coke ... I have circumnavigated the thousands of thugs from the city in pretend Armani suits who can't see you because they are so busy talking into their portable phones. So they bash you in the knees with their stupid brief-cases, with reinforced steel corners, that are absolutely essential to protect the bag of crisps and a copy of Penthouse, which is all they have inside the case ... I have detoured round the gangs of bored youths who hang around ... outside each and every one of the identical fast food outlets offering identical [rubbish] in a bag and Tennessee Fried Dog; the crocodile of French schoolgirls with their beautiful Benneton jumpers tied round their waists, just at a nice level to get caught in the face; the endless men who stop dead directly in front of me to turn round and look at the French schoolgirls; ... the road works; the bollards; the steaming piles of plastic bin liners; the taxis taking a little known short cut along the pavement; the bloke who stands around with a sandwich-board saying eat less meat and protein; and the strange bearded tramp waving his arms around and screaming [get lost] at everybody. All these things I have dealt with today, in a [blooming] wheelchair, bud. I think I could just about handle 25 assorted teachers and social workers making for the door in an upstairs pub!

Figure 6: An example of a representation of a disabled person and access issues. Note: Text in square brackets has been modified for language.

## Conclusion

The work of geographers around the world has shown that disabled people have more limited citizen rights than their non-disabled counterparts, particularly in relation to access to the built environment. As this article indicates, inaccessible environments are not 'natural' they are made by people and can, with some forethought, be constructed in an accessible form. Although legislation has started to change the landscape, it is slow and partial. There are many opportunities for geographers to help speed up the process of developing inclusive landscapes in the form of more accessible environments by providing practical solutions that will help improve the quality of life of some disabled people. In doing so geography students will be contributing to a more inclusive society as active citizens. ■

## Websites

Centre for Accessible Environments: <http://www.cae.org.uk/>

Disability Net: <http://www.disabilitynet.co.uk/>

Disability Rights Commission: <http://www.drc-gb.org/drc/default.asp>

National Disability Council: <http://www.disability-council.gov.uk/>

Newbridge Access Project: <http://www.may.ie/staff/rkitchin/newbridge.htm>

UK government disability website: <http://www.disability.gov.uk/>

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