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UN/SHARED SPACE

The dilemma of inclusive architecture

Margaret Price (2016)

Figure 13.1 shows a green sign poking up in front of a bank of evergreen shrubbery. On the sign is a stick figure in a wheelchair – this is the redesigned “Accessibility Icon” by Brian Glenney and Sara Hendren, with the figure leaning forward slightly and one arm poised over the wheel. Below the icon is the white-stenciled word “Entrance,” accompanied by an arrow pointing to the right and slightly up. I’ll say more about this image a bit later.

FIGURE 13.1 Accessible entrance sign on a university campus.

Source: Photo by author.
In this three-part essay, I first review and re-define inclusivity through a disability-studies lens. Second, I turn to the concepts of “kairotic space” (Price, 2009, 2011) and “ambience” (Rickert, 2007, 2013) in order to demonstrate that disability presents a radical challenge to architecture due to its tendency to emerge unpredictably in spacetime. Third, I support this argument by presenting evidence from an ongoing interview study of disabled faculty. In conclusion, I draw upon that evidence to suggest new directions for architectural approaches to inclusivity in the future.

**Part 1: excludable types**

It would be hard to find a word of more interest on college campuses today than “inclusivity,” unless it was “diversity,” or possibly, “budget cuts.” For example, a recent headline from the *New York Times* Education Life supplement is headlined, “Diversity is one thing, inclusion another” (Eligon, 2016). The article refers to the 2015 events at the University of Missouri involving an escalating series of racist attacks and student protests, which led eventually to the resignation of university president Tim Wolfe. As this series of events, and similar events that cascaded through U.S. campuses in 2014 and 2015 show, it’s not possible to talk about inclusivity in higher education without also engaging the question of oppression. Yet, much too often, we use the term *inclusivity* as if we could take up its good parts without also confronting the historical and present-day practices of violent exclusion that make its emphasis necessary in the first place.

Often paired with the term *inclusivity* is *welcoming*, as in, “developing a welcoming classroom” or “safe and welcoming schools.” But as Sara Ahmed (2012) points out in *On Being Included*, a study of diversity and racism in higher education, “To be welcomed is to be positioned as the one who is not at home” (p. 43). In this book, Ahmed conducts an investigation into the conditions attached to diversity for those whose presence produces that diversity. Diversity, she finds, is a commodity, a currency, sometimes an object: “Diversity can be celebrated, consumed, and eaten – as that which can be taken into the body of the university, as well as the bodies of individuals” (p. 69). This impulse is similar to one identified by Stephanie Kerschbaum, that of “fixing difference” (2014, p. 6). Difference and diversity are marked by certain metrics – brown skin, for example – and used as justification for an institution’s measurably good intentions. This is, of course, a neoliberal logic, and also a “whitely” logic (Pratt, 1984; Fox, 2002). It’s a logic assuming that intentions are equivalent to actions, that structural inequality is “no one’s fault,” and that representations of diversity (or inclusivity) can be folded into existing institutional norms without changing the institutions themselves.

If we take Ahmed’s point about positioning a bit further, we might observe that the verbs *to welcome* and *to include* operate transitively. That is, there must be an object to the verb; someone or something must be welcomed, be included. And yet, in institutional rhetoric, these words are often made into other parts of speech (the adjective *inclusive*, the noun *inclusion*), in grammatical moves that specifically hide their objects. To say *welcoming school* or *inclusive classroom* places emphasis on the space itself – the school or classroom – thus eliding the question of who needs to be welcomed, who is positioned as doing the welcoming, or why that welcome has been deemed necessary in the first place. To say a
school has the goal of inclusion similarly elides those who might be subjects in that goal: where will this goal be actualized, when will it occur, who will be shepherding the action, who will be subject to it?

Those questions—who, where, when—are drawn from Tanya Titchkosky’s The Question of Access (2011), which approaches the problem of inclusivity from the point of view of disability studies. Like Ahmed, Titchkosky examines her own and other institutions as test sites to learn how attempts at inclusivity play out in material life. For example, having observed several instances in which discussions about access at her school focus on spatial issues such as ramps, doorways, and accessible bathrooms, Titchkosky draws the following conclusions from the justifications made during these conversations: “Wheelchair users are depicted as ‘never showing up,’ as an ‘expense.’ … Disability, in this instance, can be characterized as the abject underside of legitimated existence, included as an excludable type by signing it as an always-absent-presence” (pp. 80, 90).

Both Ahmed and Titchkosky conduct intersectional analyses, with focus on different identity markers, but arriving at a similar point about the problem of trying to make inclusion happen. Regardless of how well-meant the efforts are, the very fact that gestures of inclusion are being made means that the distinction between those “in” and those “out” is reified; moreover, as the efforts and justifications play out, certain bodies are persistently marked as “excludable types” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 90; see also Titchkosky, 2007).

It is important to recognize that the “excludable type” is excluded precisely because they are imagined out of existence, or imagined into a different space where they no longer present a concern. It would be relatively easy to point to instances of exclusion if the situation of exclusion were acknowledged as such; for example, if a wheelchair user were depicted sitting in front of a flight of stairs. (This is not to suggest that such exclusions are less violent or intractable, only that they may be more readily noticed.) However, exclusion often operates in such a way that its technologies—how it “sustains itself” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 7)—are difficult to discern.

Justifications such as “Oh, this building was built before access standards were in place” or “But we did the best we could” or “There is an accessible bathroom, just not on this floor” shift the focus from the excluded disabled person and onto those who are “doing their best,” or onto the semi- or non-accessible spaces themselves. Titchkosky offers a list of common justifications, each of which places the disabled bodymind either elsewhere (they can use that other bathroom; they can come in that other entrance; they can sit in this designated row in the back of the auditorium) or elsewhen (maybe they’ll show up in the future; maybe they won’t show up) (pp. 75–76). These rhetorical moves function to create a paradox of inclusion. Inclusion is approved and valued—just not right now, or not right here. This “paints the radical lack of access in an ordinary hue” (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 77). It also has the effect of shifting the issue of “the problem” from the inaccessible space to the “problemed” bodymind (Yergeau et al., 2013), and of compounding the pain of exclusion with the additional pain of being made to feel, well, crazy.

The socio-spatial process of identifying and separating “excludable types” can be observed in many architectural features. For example, let’s return to Figure 13.1 shown and described at the beginning of this chapter. This time, we’ll view it with a bit more spatial context (Figure 13.2).
First, here is the green-and-white sign itself, with the wheelchair logo, the word “Entrance,” and the arrow pointing to the right and upward. This slightly more pulled-back perspective than the one at the beginning of this chapter shows that the sign is not just posted in front of, but is nestled among, layers of shrubbery. In the background rise red-brick buildings, typical of many U.S. college campuses. This sign delivers a familiar message to wheelchair users and others who cannot use stairs: the accessible entrance is somewhere else, probably around back, and quite likely at the other end of a winding maze of pathways and passageways. Often, “accessible” entrances can be reached only by inaccessible pathways such as wood chips, or they may take the form of large, heavy doors (without automatic openers) which are ironically emblazoned with the accessibility symbol.
In this case, the sign pointing toward the accessible entrance is situated in a somewhat extraordinary context. The next image shows the front entrance of the building where the sign is posted.

Figure 13.3 is of the full building entrance. The building, a college library, is enormous and grand, built of stone in perpendicular Gothic style, with stained-glass windows, elaborate towers, and a flight of stone steps (slightly indented from the wear of many walking feet over the years) leading up to the large wood-and-glass front doors. A student wearing a backpack is climbing the front steps, and appears tiny in comparison to the imposing building. The “accessible entrance” sign is nearly impossible to make out; it’s circled in white at the lower right-hand corner of the frame. From this perspective, it
becomes evident that the sign is quite a long distance from the front entrance, and its small size and position snuggled within the shrubs indicate that it would probably not be noticed except by accident (which is how I happened to notice it).

This sign, and its position, raise the question of *who it is for* – a question that both Ahmed and Titchkosky raise with respect to inclusivity. Is the audience for this sign a person using a wheelchair or cane, one who might approach this library eager to get inside, but be unable to navigate the steps? Or is it for the person who insisted that it appear in the first place – whoever they were, maybe a campus activist, maybe a member of the legal team? Is it for those of us who *could* walk up the steps, so that we don’t have to think about those whom the steps exclude? What work is this sign, and the spatial arrangement of this entranceway, doing in the world?

In showing you this example, my intention is not to make fun of the school where this building is located, which in fact has made significant efforts toward accessibility. And that’s my point. Even when best efforts are made, none of us is exempt from failure at inclusivity; none of us is fully able to make the leap beyond what Titchkosky calls “the unimagined type.” The presence of this sign, its position vis-à-vis the building itself, the ways it was put in place, and the ways it *continues* to circulate meaning for those who pass by – these are all parts of the machinery that sustains a lack of access with a regretful look and a shrug of the shoulders. It’s a shame; it’s regrettable; it’s no one’s fault.

That impulse – to view the lack of inclusion as “no one’s fault” – is unfortunately one that characterizes much architectural work. In the U.S., the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) has inadvertently encouraged a minimalist approach to access, to the extent that retrofits and exceptions have become the norm (see Newell, 2007; Dolmage, 2008, 2013 (also this volume); Yergeau et al., 2013; Keller, 2016). And even when aspects of physical access are carefully accounted for, other forms of access, including those that may be more difficult to discern, remain unexplored. These other forms of access may be more difficult to discern because we are accustomed to thinking of access barriers as recognizable, stable entities. But this misses the fact that many barriers – as well as forms of access – arise *in context*, shifting as the circumstances and bodyminds of/in a space shift (Boys, 2014, pp. 57, 85). Efforts for access must acknowledge the entanglement of social and material elements in the constitution of spaces. In the following two sections, I first offer a framework for thinking about these difficult-to-discern barriers by introducing theories of kairotic space and ambience, then flesh out that framework by describing the everyday experiences of disabled faculty in the higher-education workplace.

**Part 2: kairotic space, ambient rhetoric, and gathering**

Inclusivity is a topos in academic life. A topos, or commonplace topic (plural “topoi”), is a concept shared by a group as a starting place for communication. Some of the important topoi of academic life, as identified in my earlier work *Mad at School* (2011), include rationality, productivity, presence, security, and independence. Topoi function as a sort of shorthand for in-group communication; they are used as points of reference for ideas, phenomena, or people the group values or abhors. However, their meaning may not be agreed upon by *all* group members; rather, they tend to represent the *dominant* conceptions
that govern the group. Thus, topoi not only enable communication, they also obscure certain assumptions; they are, as Sharon Crowley (2006) says, “part of the discursive machinery that hides the flow of difference” (p. 73).

The classical Greek word *topos* means “place,” a point of etymology that emphasizes the importance of a socio-spatial analysis for inclusion. Spaces are, as Doreen Massey (1994) argues, “processes”:

Instead then, of thinking of places as areas with boundaries around, they can be imagined as articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings, but where a large proportion of those relations, experiences and understandings are constructed on a far larger scale than what we happen to define for that moment as the place itself, whether that be a street, or a region or even a continent.

(p. 154)

In other words, places (and spaces) both constitute and are constituted by the bodyminds, objects, practices, histories, and traces that inhabit them – and sometimes haunt them. This conception of space emerged in the 1970s and 1980s (see overview by Massey, 1994, p. 254) and has continued to develop through material and materialist feminist work such as Karen Barad’s (2003, 2007). In this section, I begin from Massey’s argument that space is a social process in order to revisit and update my theory of kairotic space.

When I initially conceived the idea of kairotic space (Price, 2009), I was preoccupied with academic conferences. Specifically, I was struggling to figure out why they were so hard for me to access. My access problems rarely occurred when I needed to ascend stairs, make my way through narrow aisles, hear speakers, view images projected onto screens, choose among narrow food options, or walk from session to session. Rather, I found that my difficulties manifested in puzzling, half-articulated concerns, which I didn’t share with anyone else: People are talking to me, but I can’t make sense of their words. I can’t remember what that person just said. People keep touching me. I’m exhausted. I have to go outside. I have to go home.

And there were also experiences not possible to articulate even in those not-very-articulate ways; for example, I can’t think of a useful way to render the mingled horror and embarrassment of I am having a panic attack during a meeting at a conference, but it has happened (more than once), and it certainly meant the space was not accessible to me – though exactly where that inaccessibility might have been located is difficult to say. Initially, when I came up with the idea of kairotic space, I knew it would be incomplete, but I also felt that this strange and often painful form of spacetime needed to be named.

In *Mad at School* (2011), I wrote:

*Kairotic space* draws upon the classical Greek notion of *kairos*, which refers to timing – that is, the good or opportune time to do or say something. Kairotic spaces are the less formal, often unnoticed, areas of academe where knowledge is produced and power is exchanged. A classroom discussion is a kairotic space, as is an individual conference with one’s professor. Academic conferences are rife with kairotic spaces, including the question-and-answer sessions after panels, impromptu “elevator meetings,” and gatherings at restaurants and bars on the periphery of formal
conference events. Other examples from students’ experiences might include peer-
response workshops, study groups, interviews for on-campus jobs, or departmental
parties or gatherings to which they are invited.
I define a kairotic space as one characterized by all or most of these criteria:
1. Events are synchronous; that is, they unfold in “real time.”
2. Impromptu communication is required or encouraged.
3. Participants are tele/present. That is, they may be present in person, through
   a digital interface such as a video chat, or in hybrid form [see below for later
   changes to this criterion].
4. The situation involves a strong social element.
5. Stakes are high.
I specify “all or most of these criteria” to indicate that the boundaries of such
spaces are neither rigid nor objectively determined. So, for instance, a meeting taking
place either in person or via instant message between a graduate student and their
academic mentor would probably qualify as a kairotic space. But an informal study
session between two students who have been friends for years and who experience
minimal risk in studying together probably would not.
The defining element of kairotic space is the pairing of spontaneity with high
levels of academic impact. Attention to relations of power is of great importance
in understanding kairotic space, as is recognition that different participants will
perceive those relations differently. I don’t claim the ability to define what is and
is not a kairotic space if I am not directly involved; in fact, that’s part of my point,
that one person in a space may feel that it’s entirely low-stakes and friendly (this is a
common assumption on the part of academic mentors, for instance), while another
may perceive a significant sense of risk.
Despite their importance, kairotic spaces in academia tend to be under-studied.
One reason for this is that, because they are unscripted, it’s difficult to collect data
in them (Ventola, Shalom, & Thompson, 2002, p. 361). Another, more compelling
reason is that their impact tends to be underestimated by those who move through
them with relative ease. The importance of kairotic space will be more obvious to
a person who – for example – can hear only scraps of a conversation held among a
group sitting at a table, or who needs more than a few seconds to process a question
asked during a one-on-one conference.
(2011, pp. 60–63)
In the years since I first developed the theory, I’ve revised my understanding of kairotic
space. One revision is that I no longer assume the participants in kairotic spaces must be
physically present; rather, I recognize that various hybrid forms of “presence,” including
presence via videoconferencing or other digital means, also come into play (Vergeau et al.,
2013; see also Dadas, 2017). In addition, although I still think it can be valuable to think
about “events unfolding in real time” when noting the inexorability and speed through
which academic spaces are often constituted, I also acknowledge that there is no such thing
as “real” time; or, as Lefebvre (1974) put it, “Time has more than one writing-system” (p.
110). Knowledge of “crip time” includes the understanding that crip time is not a simple
speeding-up or slowing-down of normative time frames, but rather may represent radical forms of bending and folding, a quantum change – time “not just expanded but exploded” (Kaer, 2013, p. 27). These changes reflect my developing awareness that kairotic spaces are constituted through the subject/objects that inhabit them and the emergent interactions of those subject/objects – an ever-unfolding process that Thomas Rickert (2013) calls “ambient rhetoric.”

In Ambient Rhetoric (2013) and the earlier “Invention in the Wild” (2007), Rickert argues that kairos is not just a temporal, but also a spatial concept. In doing so, he draws on Debra Hawhee’s (2002) work on kairos, which she argues manifests through “space-time” and enables “the emergence of a pro-visional ‘subject,’ one that works on – and is worked on by – the situation” (p. 18, qtd. in Rickert, 2007). This idea from Hawhee and others contributes to Rickert’s theory of ambient rhetoric, through which our material, spatial, and environmental surroundings, or what Rickert calls ambience, “connotes the dispersal and diffusion of agency” (2013, p. 16). Not cited by Rickert, but also crucial in developing a theory of distributed and materially entangled agency, is work by material feminist Stacy Alaimo (2008), who argues that “material agency necessitates more capacious epistemologies” involving not only human will, but also “the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, non-human creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors” (p. 238). What this means for kairotic space is not just that its inhabitants are all having different experiences (which is still true), but also that their interactions, and the ways they are attuned to and responsive to each other, constitute their spacetime, just as that spacetime continues to constitute them. This understanding of spacetime overlaps with Karen Barad’s (2003, 2007) theory of intra-activity and agency, a point I shall return to later.

This invites further consideration of what it means for subject/objects to gather in spacetime. Rickert, drawing on Heidegger, argues that the way people come together in ambient spaces, or “dwell,” has an inevitably ethical charge (Rickett, 2013, p. 16). This resonates with my conviction that kairotic spaces cannot be examined without attention to the relations of power that co-constitute them. For example, when I present at a gathering – say, a talk or workshop – I begin with an invocation that is specifically intended to call forth the socio-spatial nature of the venue, or what Rickert would call its ambience. A typical script for the invocation goes like this:

I want to take a minute to observe the space we’re in together. [At this point, I generally try to describe the space a bit. I remark on features such as the size of the space, the type of seating, whether there are steps, whether there are interpreters or captioners present, what sort of light illuminates the space, where the microphones are, and so forth.] I invite you to inhabit it in whatever way is most comfortable for you. You might wish to sit or lie on the floor rather than remain in a chair. You might want to stand up, move around, stretch, or go out and come back in. You might wish to stay in one seat, but engage in an activity such as stimming, typing, knitting, or drawing. All these forms of engagement are welcome.

(See Price, 2016 for full invocation)
I didn’t start making this invocation randomly. It was “born” in a specific moment, a conference gathering at which I witnessed a good friend, a fellow crip, being triggered – in her words, “being undone” (Kafer, 2016, p. 5). At that moment, I was thrown back in time to my own experiences of trauma; I too was undone; and (somewhat later) I began to think hard about what it means to gather in spaces together but radically not together. The person experiencing trauma, sitting at a conference presentation (or in a meeting) (or anywhere), both is and is not in the same space as the non-traumatized person sitting next to them.

This is a quality of space that, I argue, architects need to think about more carefully. When imagining or rendering “bodies in space,” how much do we know the space they may be inhabiting at any given moment? Are they in pain, are they experiencing a flashback, are they hard of hearing and thus using all their cognitive energy just to make out the flow of conversation? And without being overly deterministic about inhabitants’ experiences or needs (for that would simply bring us back to an “accommodation” model), how might architecture take into account the radical unpredictability and ambient emergence of disability when we gather together?

Part 3: how exclusion sustains itself in spacetime

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate the radical unpredictability and ambient emergence of disability in everyday spacetime. To do so, I share findings from an interview study of disabled faculty, carried out in collaboration with Dr. Stephanie Kerschbaum. As our interviews progressed, I realized that space was a key concept emerging in the faculty members’ stories: how participants navigated their campuses, arranged their offices, entered and exited meeting rooms, interacted with colleagues in social spaces, and how they evaluated the “feeling” of the various spaces in which they worked. My report of findings (still partial, since we are continuing to conduct interviews and analyze data) centers upon three themes:

- Exposure / vulnerability
- Fatigue / repetition
- Gaslighting

These themes are drawn from analysis of interviews with 32 disabled faculty members, whose positions vary widely with regard to race, gender, class, rank, type of institution, and discipline. All 32 interviewees offered their own self-identifications with respect to disability; these included autism, deafness (both signing and non-signing), Usher syndrome, bipolar disorder, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, blindness, depression, chronic pain, chronic illness (both from-birth and later-emerging illnesses), physical impairment to face or hands, chronic fatigue, paralysis, electromagnetic hypersensitivity, and quadriplegia.

The three themes, taken together, point to the necessity for co-design of academic space to foster inclusivity. However, as I emphasize in this essay’s conclusion, “co-design” does not mean vaguely “including” disabled people in the design process, but rather a much deeper and more formative approach. Moreover, it means accepting that there is
no such thing as “good” design for disability, at least not that can be definitively identified in advance. We are used to thinking of disability as something that can be accommodated through a series of predictable moves: Design the doorways like this, the walls like that, the lights like this. But instead, disability often must be accommodated as it unfolds through interactive spaces like classrooms and offices. That is more complicated than simply saying, “Allow time and a half for tests” or “Hire an interpreter” or even “Ensure the tables, chairs, and lights are adjustable.” (And, as has been abundantly documented, accommodations that might initially seem straightforward, like adjustable tables or sign-language interpreters, are also complex and unpredictable; see Titchkosky, 2011, and Blankmeyer Burke, 2013.) Disability as a critical analytic is compelling in part because it manifests human unpredictability. This is the challenge facing inclusive architecture.

**Exposure / vulnerability**

The term *exposure*, for a rock or mountain climber, refers to the steepness and openness of the terrain. It correlates with the level of risk one experiences when occupying a certain spot. For example, a steep area on a grassy hill with a long roll-out would probably be considered less exposed than a jagged rock face with similar steepness, because “exposure” is calculated not only by angle but also by consequences – that is, what will happen if you fall. Exposure, as a theme, describes a faculty member’s awareness of vulnerability as they attempt to navigate access in their workplace. The contextual nature of exposure, in the rock-climbing sense, helps convey the way that risk, for disabled faculty members, is *spatial*: it emerges through the intra-activity of the spaces they move through at work. Importantly, it also includes the intersectional ways that disability is entangled with considerations of race, class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and so on, which are always present when a disabled faculty member is assessing their exposure in a given situation.

Many of our participants discussed feeling vulnerable at work, with some using that word directly, and some describing similar feelings and circumstances (for example, saying in relation to disclosing disability, “You know I’ve got sensitive information out there.”). Just as with exposure in rock climbing, the level of risk for a disabled faculty member must be assessed by the person *in* the space, rather than being measured objectively or externally. This means that the disabled faculty member is carrying out extensive labor in remaining attuned to and guarding against that risk. Meanwhile, another participant in the same geometric space might perceive much less risk.

For example, consider the following account by Denise. In the interview, she had just stated that she has “my little blindness stump speech” that includes “canned answers that I give people” (for instance, a standard response to the question, “How long have you been blind?”). But in terms of addressing the actual day-to-day professional issues that may arise in relation to her blindness, Denise said, her sense of exposure is much higher.

D: I might have some of those conversations with my colleagues, but when I actually reveal true vulnerabilities that I feel as a disabled person, I am very careful about who I have those conversations with.

S: Right, right.
D: and I can give you an example about that. [pause]
S: Yes [please]
D: [After my after my first semester, it was the first week of the spring semester, and we
got our evaluations back from the previous semester.]
S: Mh-hmm.
D: And in one of my classes in particular, two or three students wrote that it’s very
distracting that everyone is on their phones or on Facebook, and that people are
falling asleep in class.
S: Mh-hmm.
D: This really paralyzed me, um, because I felt like I didn’t have control over my
classroom, and it makes me feel very vulnerable. Because on the one hand I know
that is a problem that almost every teacher now faces.
S: Right.
D: So what that information can mean for other people is to say to sort of, it can almost
give people the power to point me out and say, these are huge deficits she has as
a teacher, and sort of not keep it in perspective that [pause] it probably has some
unique challenges for me, but it is a problem that everyone faces. So I didn’t talk to
anyone for two days about it.
S: Right.
D: And I, I hid in my office and I just felt devastated. And because I couldn’t think of an
answ -- a solution, because I just can’t police students, I can’t see what they’re doing.
So I decided to [actually=)
S: [right]
D: =bring it to my students, my new students, and I had them come up with rules
together about how they were going to keep each other in check. So once I had that
solution, and I felt that we had very good conversations in my classes, then I did tell
two of my colleagues about the problem. [pause] I didn’t tell two other colleagues,
because I just didn’t want that information, I don’t want to say, to be used against me.

I have reprinted this section of Denise’s interview in full because it demonstrates how
her sense of exposure emerges through the intra-active features of her material situation.
According to Karen Barad (2003, 2007), intra-activity demonstrates that agency is not a
matter of an individual’s will or intention. Rather, agency “is an enactment,” something
that arises through various “cuts” in matter and spacetime. Entities that intra-act (humans,
objects, animals, etc.) are not helplessly thrown about in the process of intra-action;
indeed, as Barad emphasizes, “our intra-actions contribute to the differential mattering
of the world,” and this fact carries with it a mandate for ethical action (2007, p. 178). But
human will does not guide material encounters. Rather, the effects of those encounters
arise through the intra-activity of all elements involved in a given moment. Putting this
together with Rickert’s contention that rhetorical situations are ambient, we are better able
to understand the space that Denise found herself in.

If we think about the space of Denise’s classroom in terms of intra-activity and
ambiance, it offers a meaningful response to these common questions put to disabled (and
all minority) faculty: “Well, why not ask your colleagues for assistance, if they’ve never
shown any malice toward you? Why hide in your office? We’ve all gotten bad evaluations; isn’t your reaction a little extreme?” The pain that Denise describes (“I hid in my office and I just felt devastated”) occurs because all the elements of her work as a professor are intra-acting, including her lived experiences with ableism, dominant narratives about what “competent” instructors should be able to do, and the potential for catastrophic loss if she admits her vulnerability to the wrong person – in short, the uncertainty that surrounds disclosure. This is what I mean when I say that different subjects in a situation – for example, a blind professor and her sighted colleague – are actually inhabiting different spaces even if and when they are “together” in space. The intra-activity that composes the spaces they inhabit is entirely different.

As Denise found out when she was finally able to talk to a colleague she trusted, not only did he not blame her, but he affirmed her concerns, and further noted that she had come up with a good solution. Despite this best-possible outcome, Denise still had to perform the labor of being attuned to her own vulnerability. That burden of being constantly on guard, of noticing and heading off potential problems, of protecting oneself from possible bad outcomes, not to mention managing the emotional stress involved, has also been remarked upon in other work by minority faculty (see discussion of intersectionality, below). The key thing I want to highlight is that it does not matter whether the intentions of the people surrounding the disabled faculty member are good, ill, or indifferent; the disabled faculty member must perform the labor of vulnerability regardless. This puts a markedly different spin on top-down campus efforts to become more “welcoming” or “inclusive.” Those activating such initiatives are missing a salient fact: The space they inhabit is not the same space occupied by those they are attempting to “welcome” (see Ahmed, 2012).

I’ve analyzed Denise’s example in detail because it illustrates the point I want to make about exposure and how it changes academic space. But Denise’s is not an isolated case: Many other faculty members interviewed expressed similar experiences about having to perform the labor of vulnerability, and how that affected the spaces in which they worked. Performing these constant calculations, remaining vigilant about potential risk, is exhausting.

**Fatigue**

The term “access fatigue” comes from Annika Konrad (2016), who defines it as “being plain sick of having to ask for access.” Without conflating the situations of disabled and racially minoritized faculty, it is worth noting that a similar phenomenon has been documented for people of color: “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, 2004, qtd. in Wilson, 2012, p. 70). This repetitive labor is exhausting. Disabled faculty must meet the usual expectations of faculty work in the neoliberal university (growing class sizes, vanishing job security, shrinking job opportunities, increasing service duties), and also meet the constant demands of negotiating their disabilities at work. These demands range from arranging accommodations (if such are even available) to managing the ambient sense of exposure and vulnerability described in the previous section. As I analyzed faculty members’ interviews, an important theme that emerged was the constant nature of the labor interviewees had to perform when negotiating being disabled at work. More than
one interviewee, when asked “Do you talk about your disability at work?” responded, “All the time.” The exact repetition of that phrase, from more than one interviewee, called my attention to the potential for this theme; when I analyzed the data further, it became clear that many of the faculty members we interviewed found “access fatigue” (Konrad, 2016) a salient component of their jobs.

One faculty member who said “All the time” was Trudy, a non-tenure-track faculty member at a small private college. She had been in this job for more than 20 years at the time of the interview, a fact that makes her story about having to constantly recapitulate the issue of her disability and access needs even more striking:

T: I'm always asserting them [my access needs]. There are a handful of people who know me really well, who are good friends as well as colleagues, who always anticipate them. Most people forget.
S: Okay.
T: They don’t—even though I’m very public, even though I’m always asserting them, even people I work with on a regular basis will say, “Oh let’s have a breakfast meeting.” You know. They already know that I can’t do that.
S: Right, right.
T: But no, I have to do—It’s continual, okay.
S: Okay.
T: Yeah, it is continual.

As Trudy’s explanation indicates, the act of “coming out” as disabled is not a one-time event, but rather one that happens repeatedly. The barrier of having one’s access needs forgotten, and having to re-assert those needs constantly, is one that must be surmounted regularly by disabled faculty. This barrier is further evidence that disabled faculty work in different spaces than their colleagues, even if they share the same geographic and geometric space. I might say the barrier is “invisible,” but that is an inadequate metaphor; access fatigue is not just unseen, but does not exist for nondisabled faculty (although they may, of course, have to work for access for other reasons). Moreover, the nondisabled faculty member is unlikely to notice that a seemingly insignificant exchange they may have just witnessed (“I need this”; “I can’t do that”; “I can do that only if the following conditions are in place”) is sapping the energy and morale of their colleague, because the nondisabled observer probably witnesses only a few of the daily repetitions which can easily reach the dozens, or hundreds. Returning to the concept of kairotic space, this may help explain why architectural efforts to foster collegiality so often fail. A “relaxed, social” space for one person is, for another, simply yet another site in which they must carry out unpaid and unnoticed labor.

Many other interviewees described the toll taken by the need to constantly assert or adjust for their access needs. For example, Nicola, a working-class adjunct faculty member with multiple sclerosis, described the constant maneuvers she must perform, both internally and when communicating with colleagues, supervisors, or students, to match the demands of her job to the capabilities of her disabled bodymind. She explained that her daily routine “is basically a series of very clever strategies that I use to either conserve
energy, to compensate for deficits [M: Mh-hm] or to mask what’s going on with me.” Marian, a deaf faculty member at a large university, said, “It’s like disclosure over and over again, every single class that you stand in front of.” Del, who is autistic, related that at a time in her career when it wasn’t safe to reveal herself as autistic, she performed intense and constant labor to hide her usual mannerisms, which involve rocking and stimming: “I carefully like kept my hands in my pockets all the time and my body tense and I didn’t move … I made myself really sick.” Some interviewees also described ways that structural changes in their workplaces helped mitigate the exhaustion of constant explanations. For example, Maya, a researcher with Usher Syndrome, is like most of her co-workers in that she is deaf and communicates mostly by signing; however, unlike most of her co-workers, she is also visually impaired and has epilepsy. After a number of individual exchanges with co-workers, her supervisor asked her to make two presentations to her research team to describe her access needs. Maya wrote, “That proved to be useful, and most colleagues were very understanding and appreciative of the information.”

Although any faculty member could point to examples in which they’ve had to perform unpaid labor to accommodate their own needs, the difference between this experience and the ones described here is scale. For the disabled faculty we interviewed, these acts of unpaid labor often constitute an all-the-time, every-day series of calculations, moves, counter-moves and corrections. When the burden of this sort of constant labor is scaled up, it leads to circumstances that are not just difficult but may be intolerable. Notably, our interview sample includes at least two faculty members who have left academia.

**Gaslighting**

The third theme, gaslighting, identifies the experience of being made to “feel crazy” when confronting inaccessible spaces in the workplace. *Gaslighting* is a term that originated with a 1930s stage play and was popularized through a 1944 film, *Gaslight*, in which a husband manipulates his wife’s surroundings in such a way that she comes to doubt her perception of reality. The term traveled into psychiatric literature and has since been used colloquially, especially in minority communities, to describe the experience of being made to feel that one’s perception of a situation is inaccurate – that one is remembering events wrong, or blowing things out of proportion, or interpreting events incorrectly. This theme appeared less frequently during interviews than exposure or fatigue; however, I am highlighting it because it was mentioned more frequently by multiply minoritized faculty, especially those who are queer and/or of color in addition to being disabled. Part of the purpose of our “maximum variation” sampling approach, in which we aimed to gather as wide a range of faculty experiences as possible, was to uncover such themes, which may be more salient for disabled faculty living with intersectional experiences of oppression.

Zoe, an assistant professor at a minority-serving institution, described a number of microaggressions she experienced on the job market; for example, at one campus interview, a search-committee member made a mocking comment about ADD (attention deficit disorder; one of Zoe’s diagnoses), and later used the R-word. At her new workplace, issues continued, and Zoe described her sense of being pressed into a role as the “stereotypical crazy Latina”: 
It’s like, no matter how many degrees you have, you’re always worried about being the stereotypical crazy Latina who just has to be a problem. [break] Who reads race into everything, who reads ableism into everything, or sexism. And it’s like, how do I not do that? That’s my life.

This comment also fits with the theme of exposure; however, it is further complicated because Zoe’s sense of risk was heightened by the (micro)aggressions she encountered on the job. (I put “micro” in parentheses because Zoe commented at one point, “I don’t wanna call them microaggressions because they’re pretty blatant.”) She described a process of gaslighting that unfolded after she met another professor at her school: when the two were discussing a topic their research had in common, this professor referred to medieval women mystics, “as ‘wild,’ ‘crazy,’ and ‘just plain nuts, which is why they’re fun.’ I [Zoe] was appalled.” As Zoe continued the story, she indicated that this professor “maligned” her teaching, then described what happened when she tried to complain:

Z: When I complained about it, my concerns were dismissed.
S: My stomach is sinking reading this [break] I am honestly so shocked that this person wants to teach [topic of class].
Z: And I was asked if I might be reading into things or whether I might be blowing things out of proportion, and I know these questions come as a result of what people know about my disabilities. … So here’s how I see it working: I have anxiety disorder and I worry about things a lot, and how they affect me or my students. I overthink things sometimes. As a result, when I have spoken to colleagues about my concerns with this person, no one has been able to offer any useful advice. One person said he hadn’t heard anything negative, and the other person said I might just be taking things the wrong way and “reading into it.” [break] One even asked if maybe I wasn’t just being a little paranoid.

This example demonstrates why an intersectional analysis of factors leading to workplace discrimination is crucial: Zoe’s story is not only about her disabilities, but also about the ways they intertwine with her race, gender, and the subjects she teaches. As with the earlier examples, Zoe’s can be read as one in which elements intra-act to place her and her colleagues in entirely different spaces. There is an insidious additional factor at work here, however, which is that the reality of the space Zoe inhabits is itself called into question.

Stories of gaslighting did not come up as often as stories of fatigue or exposure. However, when they did come up, it was frequently by faculty who experienced intersectional pressures of disability, race, gender, sexuality, and/or class. Gaslighting overlaps with disability in complex ways, since not only may disability figure into the subjectivity of the person being gaslighted – as Zoe’s story shows – but gaslighting itself effects disablement by forcing a subject to “feel crazy.” In fact, the end stage of gaslighting, according to psychiatric research, is “severe, major, clinical depression” (Abramson, 2014, p. 23). Elena Flores Ruiz (2014) calls gaslighting “a kind of professionalized, ambient abuse” (p. 201) – using the term ambient, as Rickert (2013) does, to mark an emergent and spatial phenomenon.
Much more work remains to be done on the intersectional pressures faced by multiply marginalized faculty, including those who are disabled and those who become disabled as a result of gaslighting. For the purposes of this chapter, I will point out that this is yet another way in which disabled faculty simultaneously are and are not in the same spaces as those they work alongside.

Part 4: conclusion

As I wrote this chapter, I found myself coming up against a difficult question: If architecture – at least, the sort of architecture typically used to construct buildings in academe – is an essentially predictive endeavor, and I am arguing that disability should be recognized as essentially unpredictable, what does this mean for the future of accessible architecture? To put the question in somewhat less impossible terms, I am asking: If we accept that disability is an emergent phenomenon, one that materializes through the intra-actions of people, attitudes, histories, objects, and other ambient features of a space, how do we design for disabled bodyminds?

One approach that has proven not very successful is establishing a checklist and then adhering to it rigidly (see Wood, Dolmage, Price & Lewiecki-Wilson, 2014; Dolmage, 2015). This can be seen in “minimal compliance” applications of ADA standards (see Newell, 2007): too often, the law serves as a baseline for what designers can get away with rather than inspiring what new forms of access they might imagine. Other types of building standards may try for access, but in a hit-or-miss way that demonstrates an obvious failure to deeply consult disabled people. For example, the relatively new WELL building standard is explicitly centered upon health, and takes into account issues such as building occupants’ mental health, need for physical/mental respite, and potential chemical sensitivities. However, WELL creates other problems, such as valorizing the use of stairs over elevators, on the assumption that this is a healthier choice, while apparently forgetting that some occupants are simply unable to use stairs (Keller, 2016). Even universal design, for all its revolutionary history, is often approached as nothing more than a checklist with seven items (see Dolmage, 2008; Hamraie, 2013). Still, at the end of the day, the standards themselves are not the main problem. Large-scale building would not be possible without some form of standard or guideline. The main problem is the failure to imagine access differently (Titchkosky, 2011; Boys, 2014).

Co-design, or participatory design, is an obvious remedy for poorly imagined architecture. This argument has been made within disability studies for decades, as the slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us” attests (Charlton, 1998). However, the problems of inclusion noted by Ahmed (2012) and Titchkosky (2011) characterize efforts at co-design as well. Many plans for accessible design state that disabled people must be “included” in the design process. But what does that really mean? When will we be included, and under what circumstances? To what extent will disabled people produce, rather than just comment on, the spaces where we work? For that matter, what sorts of disabilities will be “included” for consideration? As a disability activist working to foster accessible spaces in academe, I have learned over and over again that “inclusion” can mean almost anything when co-design is claimed. And, while disabled people in academe certainly do inhabit
spaces in the way that Massey (1994) describes, that is, hacking and re-making them as we go, it’s rare that disabled people are truly centered in the process of accessible design.

In *Speculative Everything*, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby (2013) propose an approach that moves away from realism and focuses instead on the question “What if?” (p. 141). They emphasize that, unlike most forms of social design, which continue to work within “the limits of reality as it is” (p. 12), speculative design attempts to work fictively, deliberately imagining worlds that cannot be in order to improve design in the world that is. In addition to centering disabled people as producers rather than bystanders or latecoming consultants (Yergeau et al. 2013), I call upon architects and those interested in accessible space to consider what it might mean to identify with disabled people – to enter our spaces rather than inviting us to enter yours. The process of identifying-with is described by Sami Schalk (2013):

I use identify with to mean having acknowledged and prioritized political and personal connections to a group with which one does not identify as a member. … Identifying with is a careful, conscious joining – a standing/sitting among rather than by or behind a group – which seeks to reduce separation while acknowledging differences in privileges and oppression.

Schalk’s definition of identifying-with is spatial: she notes that it involves “standing/sitting among rather than by or behind.” This sort of action, this among, is different than calling disabled people in for a design charrette; it might mean visiting (with permission) the spaces disabled people already inhabit, learning about our hacks and our customs, learning where our barriers lie – with the understanding, once again, that no two disabled people will face just the same barriers. Coming to know disabled people’s everyday lives and spaces enables the development of what Mia Mingus (2011) calls “access intimacy” – that is, the ability to understand another’s access needs viscerally, even intuitively at times. There is no shortcut for this sort of visceral, ambient knowledge; like dwelling (Reynolds, 2004), it can only be effected through time and space, not willed or predicted. The “what-if?” of speculative design (Dunne & Raby, 2013), the possibilities of a “politics of wonder” advocated by Tanya Titchkosky (2011), mean that inclusion itself must be understood as fundamentally unstable. It means identifying with; accepting failure; trying, and trying again, through meaningful feedback loops. Today’s academe is a prototype.

**Note**

The study reported on here was supported by a Research Initiative grant from the Conference on College Composition and Communication (Price and Kerschbaum, Principal Investigators). Our sampling method is “maximum variation sampling,” sometimes called “diversity sampling,” which aims to locate participants on as wide a range as possible. Our interest is not in asking, “Who is typical or representative?” but rather, “Who is unimagined?” In addition, we deliberately set up an “accessible interdependent research paradigm” (Price, 2011). Interviews took place in whichever medium participants identified as their preference, including face-to-face video-conference, telephone (with captioning), e-mail, or instant-message. Interviews were both oral and signed.
In the interview excerpts used here, “M” indicates Margaret Price; “S” indicates Stephanie Kerschbaum. Although our raw transcripts use line breaks to mark every breath, and omit all punctuation except to indicate linguistic features, the rendition of the interviews here is edited for readability, with some added punctuation, and fewer line breaks. Ellipses indicate omitted phrases or sections, rather than pauses. Pauses of two seconds or more are noted as [pause]. Brackets and equal signs indicate overlapping and latched speech. For non-indented quotations, if speech overlaps, brackets are used to denote the overlap (for example, an interviewer saying “Mh-hm” while a participant is speaking).

For typed interviews, minor spelling errors have been corrected. [break] indicates a paragraph break in the typed instant-message conversation, i.e., when one of the interlocutors hits “return.” In some cases, an interlocutor hits “return” and then adds something else; in that case, [break] will appear in the middle of their quote.