

Accessibility and Disability in the Built Environment: Negotiating the Public Realm in Thailand 2011

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Abstract

This study aims to understand accessibility for disabled people through the socially constructed concept of disability. Impaired bodies are mainly disabled by disabling social and physical impediments. The built environment reflects how society understands disability and accessibility. How can disabled people individually and collectively resist, transcend, and change those disabling barriers?

Thailand has had access laws since 1991, but many public places are still inaccessible for disabled people. One of the major challenges for creating accessible facilities is the lack of acknowledgement of disabled people's spatial experiences, requirements and ways to overcome barriers. An exploration of a wider range of socio-political and cultural issues surrounding disability can deepen our understanding of physical accessibility for disabled people.

This research is qualitative in approach and based on mixed methods. The discussions are divided into two main themes: 1. Meaning, and its product of understanding disability, and 2. The process of negotiating inaccessibility. Firstly, understanding of 'pi-garn' or disability is examined through culture representations such as language, literature, and media. Information from secondary data is used together with primary data in the form of in-depth interviews complimented by a postal survey. Through a focus on public facilities the thesis investigates understandings of disability and accessibility and how these produce the built environments. Secondly, the research investigates processes through which disabled people individually and collectively overcome access barriers. A daily life experience of a disabled individual is explored in depth as is a process of disabled people as a collective in overturning existing socio-political structure to press for their access requirements through a case of footpath renovation project in Bangkok.

The analyses indicate that disabled people resist an idea of disability linked with individual tragedy and illness by changing language use and reproducing the self through daily life. Performing daily activities in public places can be a way to demonstrate to society as a whole that the common notion of disability equalling

dependency is mistaken. By actively participating in the movement, disabled people are overturning this dominant ideology. Fusing access issues with mainstream agendas such as quality of life and contributing to the prestige of an icon in Thai society provides opportunities for disabled people as a collective voice to achieve their access requirements.

In sum, by individually and collectively acting as agents for change in challenging popular perceptions, disabled people are drawing attention to the social construction of their disability. It is disabling physical environments that must be excluded not their impaired bodies. This research proposes ways in which the environmental experiences of impaired bodies as well as the role of disabled people as partners in creating accessible facilities can be included in consideration of access policies and their implementation in Thailand.