

Photo essay



Disabled infrastructure: an urban photo essay

December 22, 2022

Issue: [Just mobility, transport and urban infrastructures](#)

Kristofer Hansson

In 1968, the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre published his book *The right to the city* (Lefebvre, 2009). From the original idea of the book — that cities are for people, building collective life and not for capitalist transactions where city life is commodified and citizens mere consumers — the concept of “the right to the city” has become widely employed by different grassroots organizations aiming for social justice in the city. In the following, I will give examples of how recognition is fundamental in planning the urban environment and giving people with disability — citizens and inhabitants of the city — equal access to the city. This photo essay originates with the importance physical environment has for accessibility and the spatial justice for everyone to take place in the city on equal terms. Through a few photographs taken in situations where I carried out so-called ‘go-along’ with persons using electric wheelchairs, I will discuss and analyse the relationship between the physical environment and the individual.

So let’s begin, the setting is as following: I am strolling along the sidewalk with a woman using an electric wheelchair. It is a sunny day, but the buildings next to the street are making a shadow where we are walking. This is of importance since the woman has a visual impairment as well. We have been walking for a while with no problems, until we arrive at this specific part which can be seen in the picture above. She was driving her wheelchair and I walked alongside. We talked about everyday things and then we reached this narrow space because of a car parked partly on the sidewalk, I decided to walk behind her, because it was too narrow to be next to each other. She drove her wheelchair forward, but it was stopped due to unevenness in the foundation due to a missing stone in the sidewalk. Instead of a strolling, flowing alongside the sidewalk and talking to each other in a nice sunny day, a new situation occurred when a resistance arose and she was stopped. Our discussion was interrupted. For a few seconds, she struggled with the wheelchair and the crack in the pavement to get further along the street. She managed to get through and we were able to continue. I turned around and took the picture.

Today’s conventions and laws are clear that sidewalks are a space which should be possible to use on equal terms; this photograph tells us something else. During this situation, I did not ask about her experience of getting stuck in the pavement or what feelings this unintended stop created for her. This was, however, not in my focus though I wanted to understand this situation in relation to the embodied interaction that was created in moment the wheelchair stopped. The sentiment of the woman has its own importance and depending on the individual interpretation of the situation, can be considered as an individual failure, a personal challenge, a sign that society is not adapted to people who use wheelchairs, and so on. For this essay, however, the personal experience is not in focus. Instead, my theoretical interest is to understand how infrastructure interacts with humans and contributes to resistance in moving around. For some people who use a wheelchair, the resistance a crack in the pavement which makes the wheelchair stop doesn’t have to mean anything, for others it can be one of many signs that reinforce their political struggle to make the city more inclusive to everyone. And here the sidewalk is central because this specific urban space constitutes an urban common, a shared space. When many people move at the same time on the sidewalk, they

do it together (Østerberg, 1998).

From this example I want to develop the discussion on the right to the city in relation to the research field of critical disability studies. Critical disability studies acknowledge disability as something arising from the environment the person is a part of and not as a medical explanation directed at the individual's body. In this text I want to focus more on the materialities shown in the photograph, and not on the language and discourses about the inclusive city (Flynn, 2017). It is a theoretical as well as methodological perspective that is central in my research about how infrastructure in the city creates obstacles and resistance for people with disability. This interaction between the physical and material and the body is central to understand how the city matters for everyone and how we as a society can change and develop the city in a direction towards spatial accessibility for everyone. My research is based on a method where I accompany people in the city and observe how they deal with obstacles and limitations in the physical environment. I record my observations in a notebook and take pictures with my mobile camera. During these observations, I also talk and ask questions to the persons I accompany. In this specific text I will analyse these observations with the help of assemblage theory that understand human action in relation to materiality (DeLanda, 2008). I will here present my theoretical arguments more.

To understand the situation of resistance that the poorly maintained sidewalk creates for the woman in the example above, I want to point out with the help of Susan Flynn “that the consequences of disability lie also in the everyday and the mundane” (Flynn, 2017: 154). The body, that we don't see in the picture, exists in this material context and is therefore both contextual and relational (Feely, 2016). Following the theoretical arguments from Rhys Price-Robertson and Cameron Duff, the embodied interactions can be said to “lie *outside of discourse*” (Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016, p. 61). With such a starting point, the individual's own descriptions of the experiences are deprioritized in favour of sub-personal components — the interactions between parts — which constitute strolling along the sidewalk in the city as in the example above. Like Price-Robertson and Duff, I'm interested in the assemblage theory that analyses the forms of infrastructure that are central to create the resistance as described above. With the help of the philosopher Manuel DeLanda (2008), Price-Robertson and Duff argue that we need to focus on the relations between heterogenous parts as an assemblage to understand how resistance occurs (Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016). It is not the individual's personalities that are of interest when I'm doing this analysis, but rather the assemblages of the infrastructure both visible and non-visible in the picture, the norms that stipulate how the sidewalk should be used, other individuals and their actions and so on.

So, what components can be distinguished in the photography? It is a sidewalk with mixed foundation. Not all surfaces are good for wheelchair users. Smaller paving stones are problematic because they are often uneven. Because the car is parked on the sidewalk everyone who comes with a wheelchair, or a walker for that matter, will be forced to make use of that part that consist of paving stones. Another important component is the car, but also the car owner. The car belongs to a craftsman and the house next door is being renovated. For the craftsman, it is practical to park right at the entrance to bring in

materials. Also, the municipality can be regarded as such an absentee component. They are responsible for the maintenance and care of the pavement, and in this case it is not well maintained. The municipality also regulates if and where cars can be parked close by or on the sidewalks. Let's take a closer look at the picture.



With the help of assemblage theory and the many heterogenous parts derived from this picture, I will now provide an analysis on how to understand the sidewalk as a common space and its political implications for people with disabilities and the right to the city from a perspective of recognition. My point is that assemblage theory is of great use if the theory is connected to a more political perspective found in critical disability studies. In the article “Key concerns for critical disability studies,” disability researchers Dan Goodley, Rebecca Lawthom, Kirsty Liddiard and Katherine Runswick-Cole (2021) make this connection between non/human constitutions and social justice:

We therefore follow the lead of many foundational Disability Studies theorists who came to the study of disability not because this constituted an interesting topic of inquiry but because of a commitment to challenging various conditions of disablism that dehumanised people with sensory, cognitive and physical impairments. (p. 32)

From this combination of assemblage- and Critical disability studies, following analysis can be made: one stone is missing, and it is this hole that also one of the small front wheels of the wheelchair of the woman I was accompanying in the example above got stuck in. The lack of a stone in the sidewalk is a part of the material context (cf. Feely, 2016), it is a lack of infrastructure that in this situation creates an obstacle — friction — for the woman. The hole is in this way an important component in its mundaneness. But there are other heterogenous parts that we need to bring forward to understand this situation (cf. DeLanda, 2008). One heterogenous part is the municipality's road maintenance, although this is an absentee component. The municipality is responsible for

fixing the pavement, but has missed this absent little stone which now causes problems. Also, as mentioned above, the visual impairment of the woman and the shadow from the nearby building is adding to the situation where she was restricted to move on.

DeLanda (2008) points out that there are two dimensions that must be examined in the assemblage presented in this essay. First the importance of the mentioned components. They can be either material (as the car), or expressive (as the municipality's road maintenance). Second, how the assemblage either can determine or destabilize the situation, which means that assemblages can change. In this way, as Price-Robertson and Duff write, the assemblage "have *material* dimensions or components (e.g., spaces, objects, technologies, bodies), and *expressive* ones (e.g., identities, signs, affects, desires)" (Robertson & Duff, 2016, p. 63). In this way the assemblage "exist at all levels" (p. 70).

What we haven't mentioned, because it is not seen on the picture, is the wheelchair and the woman who uses it. It is through the woman and the wheelchair that it can be asked what kind of assemblage is determining the situation (this is not a situation where the assemblage is destabilised). In this assemblage, it is a woman using a wheelchair who has a desire to be part of an urban mobility that can take her through the street of the city. But raising awareness of the friction and making it clear that it's an obstacle or limitation for here, is central. Why? In the process of becoming conscious of a given situation, a political subject is created that can explain and clarify the injustices people with disabilities encounter when moving around in the city.

Being politically aware and doing a political analysis, means in this case to show that the municipality doesn't bother to repair its sidewalk, or claiming that the craftsman is "blind" for the needs of others when using the sidewalk as parking, or pointing to the fact that someone at a certain point took a stone out of the sidewalk and left a hole in the ground. Several individual actions become intertwined in a complex web of elements that restricts people's ability to take part in the city. With a similar empirical as well as theoretical gaze other physical items such as electric scooters or bicycles risk creating inaccessibility. On another go-along, I joined a group of severely visually impaired people patching bikes that were not parked in bike racks. Bicycles standing against houses and in the middle of pavements constituted a dangerous obstacle for groups of people, limiting these groups from accessing the city in their own conditions.

But the point to bring in assemblage theory in this analysis of urban mobilities and infrastructures, is the opportunity to broaden the analysis and not focus solely on individuals. It's important not to "decentre the subject," or for that matter attach too much importance to macro structure (Brown, 2010 in Price-Robertson & Duff, 2016). In a political analysis, we often wish to do one or the other, but as we see in this analysis, many different sub-personal components are required for friction to be created in the first place. This is an important perspective as we approach the city with a critical disability perspective.



“All that is solid melts into air” is a classic quote and book title taken from Marx, which is usually used to describe the modernization of the city (Berman, 1982). How all the houses and roads that were perceived to be solid are flattened with the ground for the new to grow up. The modern Paris tends to be the prototype for this transformation. But this metaphor for the city’s growth risks making invisible an analysis of the city as consisting of many different parts from different eras. Thus, the metaphor also risks making us blind to how inaccessibility arises and persists.

Look, for example, in the picture above. Here are some different eras that clash with each other. The house includes a shop that was probably built in the 1800s or early 1900s. At this time, it was obvious that there would be a staircase to enter the shop. When the city in modern times would become accessible to everyone, this was problematic. But instead of demolishing the building, the owner has solved it with a bell and a sign that signals that help is available for those who want to enter. The problem here is that someone broke the bell, in much the same way that someone removed a paving stone on the sidewalk. Instead of considering the city as something that melts into air, I want to argue that it is more fulfilling to use Dag Østerberg’s consideration that the city consists of sediments — or assemblages — from different time periods (Østerberg, 1998). The theoretical point here is that each sediment represents a certain period of governance. Each governance has had its own special view of the city and how it should be built and organized. At the same time, it is also a governance that can say something about which people are supposed to take place in the city. A shop in a house that is built with an entrance that has a narrow door to enter and two or three steps, was built for a walking person. These entrances are not designed for wheelchairs. But today this sediment is part of the assemblage with sediments which has a governance where everyone should have the opportunity to access the city. In my example, this sediment is a simple sign and a bell, but I can also be much more complex. Ramps can be added, buildings converted, and so on. In this view, the city’s

infrastructure is not instable and always in flux, but as an assemblage which creates certain forms of infrastructure.

To understand specific assemblages gives us a possibility to understand a certain period of governance, but also the forces that try to counteract this governance. As DeLanda (2008) points out, the assemblage can be destabilised and then changed. When someone tears apart the bell in the picture above, the assemblage which should enable everyone to enter the store is undermined and the city becomes a little bit less accessible. Then the older and much more persistent sediment risk to appear underneath and determine the situation for persons using wheelchairs or electric scooter (cf. DeLanda, 2008). But this destabilization can also be used in reverse, to criticize and change infrastructures that hinder urban mobilities for everyone.



To finalize this essay, I will now turn to this ramp that can be seen in the picture and to some other creative actors claiming the right to the city. Look at the photograph above; this ramp is constructed by some private individuals who want to make the surroundings more accessible on their own. A similar example is Rita Ebel from Germany, who started to construct her own ramps with Lego. These ramps are not only bought by stores to make their business premises more accessible; the Lego ramps also catch people's attention. In this way, Ebel hopes that people start to think about the importance of ramps. In a news article Ebel says: "Nobody just walks past a Lego ramp without taking a look. Whether it's children who try to get the bricks out or adults who take out their mobile phones to take pictures" (Reuters Staff, 2020). Getting access is not only a material thing, but is also about all people's view of how obstacles can be avoided. It can be about not parking the car or bicycle on the pavement, not breaking the shop bell, or not removing the paving stone from the sidewalk.

This is very creative and shows that the right to the city and the urban space matters in

many different ways. The city provides numerous people with greater possibilities to connect to other people and access materiality in multiple ways and thereby experience and gain freedom (Gibson, 2006). Freedom can be interpreted in many ways: to meet people, freedom to explore your own identity, freedom to express yourself, freedom to shop, and so on. The city is a place where you can disturb and challenge hegemonic desire (Saldanha, 2012) and challenge normative ideas and ideals. To use what sometimes has been called, *the crip potential* to demonstrate other and different ways of disability (Kafer, 2013; Goodley et al., 2021).

An inspiring actor for the right to the city is a cooperative in Gothenburg which creates political awareness through actions in the city. One example is their “CP-free zones” which were launched in 2019 when they replaced tourist maps with their own maps, where all of Gothenburg’s inaccessible neighbourhoods were marked. These inaccessible places were called “CP-free zones” and in this way they initiated a debate about the city and how it is excluding groups of people (GIL Personlig assistans, 2022). They wanted to make visible how a city, as they said, is for certain groups while others are not allowed access. This is a political action made by a social group which has not been granted recognition in the description of what the city is and for whom. The action can be said to be in line with fundamental aspects of social justice.

“CP-free zones” are one example to both demonstrate what is wrong in the urban areas, and at the same time make visible what disability could be instead. Using assemblage theory gives us a possibility to see urban spaces in new ways, how these spaces connect different elements and thus create political alliance with potential to change the city. To simply destabilize the dominant — and normative — assemblage that builds a certain type of infrastructure, and instead come up with new set of interconnected relations that challenge the taken for granted understanding of the urban space. It enhances a form of political activism in the city. At one point, I conducted a go-along to investigate this destabilizing assemblage. The group I followed is made up of blind and visually impaired people who went out in the city to attach notes to bicycles and e-scooters that were wrongly parked. The bicycles and e-scooters could be standing on the pavement, in front of door openers into shops, or in squares, instead of in marked racks. The notes read: “Where you put things may not be such a big deal to you. But for the visually impaired, unexpected obstacles are an accident risk. Unfortunately, every third person with visual impairment chooses to not go out on their own. Think of us visually impaired next time. Please put this in a safer place.” This might not destabilize the ruling assemblage right away, but has the potential to do so in the long run.

I will end this essay in this very tangible way, but at the same time emphasize that this is a very practical, but important, way of looking at social justice and different social groups *right to the city*, once again going back to Lefebvre’s concept (2009). In this way, I follow Goodley and his colleague’s argument to “advocate an approach that recognises the ways in which disabled people’s emancipation is tied intimately to a host of human and non-human interrelations” (Goodley et al., 2021, p. 44). To change disabled infrastructures in urban areas, we need to start understanding the assemblage of human and non-human interrelations.

References

- Berman, M. (1982) *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Brown, S. (2010) 'Between the planes: Deleuze and social science' in: Jensen, C. & Rødje, K. (eds.) *Deleuzian intersections: science, technology and anthropology*. Oxford, UK: Berghahn Books.
- DeLanda, M. (2008) 'Deleuzian social ontology and assemblage theory' in Fuglsang, M. & Sørensen, B. (eds.), *Deleuze and the social*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press.
- Feely, M. (2016) 'Disability studies after the ontological turn: a return to the material world and material bodies without a return to essentialism', *Disability & Society*, 31(7), p 863–883. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2016.1208603>
- Flynn, S. (2017) 'Engaging with materialism and material reality: critical disability studies and economic recession', *Disability & Society*, 32(2), p 143–159. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2017.1284650>
- Gibson, B.E. (2006) 'Disability, connectivity and transgressing the autonomous body', *J Med Humanit*, 27, p 187–196. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-006-9017-6>
- GIL Personlig assistans (2022) *CP-fria zoner*. Available at: <https://www.gil.se/kampanjer/cp-fria-zoner> (Accessed: September 10, 2022).
- Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2021) 'Key Concerns for Critical Disability Studies'. *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice* 1(1), p 27–49. <https://doi.org/10.13169/intljofdissocjus.1.1.0027>
- Kafer, A. (2013) *Feminist, queer, crip*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (2009) *Le droit à la ville*. 3e éd. Paris: Economica-Anthropos.
- Price-Robertson, R., & Duff, C. (2016) 'Realism, materialism, and the assemblage: Thinking psychologically with Manuel DeLanda'. *Theory & Psychology*, 26(1), p 58–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354315622570>
- Reuters Staff (2020) 'German grandma builds wheelchair ramps from Lego', *Reuters*, February 19, 2020. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lego-ramps-germany-idUSKBN2oD1PU> (Accessed: 10 September 2022)
- Saldanha, A. (2012) 'Assemblage, materiality, race, capital' *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 2(2), p 194–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2043820612449302>
- Østerberg, D. (1998) *Arkitektur og sosiologi i Oslo: en sosio-materiell fortolkning* Oslo: Pax.

Authors



Kristofer Hansson

Associate Professor » Malmö University

Kristofer Hansson is a lecturer at the Department of Social Work, Malmö University and holds an Associate Professorship in Ethnology. His research focuses on people living with long-term sickness and disability, as well as medical praxis in health care and emerging new biomedical technologies. In recent years, the city has interested him and why cities are often unfriendly to people with disabilities. He is one of the editors of the anthology “Accessibility Denied: Understanding Inaccessibility and Everyday Resistance to Inclusion for Persons with Disabilities.”