

CIL BERKELEY

Talk 5/21

Thanks-

This is a talk based on a few parts of my book, *Accessible America: A History of Design and Disability in the United States*. This book is about the idea of access as a relatively new concept that merges twentieth century design and technology with the emerging notion of civil rights protections for disabled people.

One of the major trends I cover in the book is a shift in thinking about access as a primarily private burden to a public responsibility

SLIDE One the screen is the image of a ramp built for one of the most famous disabled

Americans, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a man who navigated the world with paralyzed legs largely by expending personal and familial resources. Roosevelt wore heavy leg braces and walked by leaning on the arm of another person, usually one of his sons. As he traveled the nation to campaign, he rode in an open convertible to greet crowds and avoid walking. At times, he did use structures built by the U.S. government, such as a special ramp to the floor of Congress, or this large ramped grandstand set up in front of a Jasper, Alabama government building. The long sloping sides of this boardwalk ramp make a Greek temple-style portico accessible. For the most part these structures disappeared at the end of Roosevelt's Presidency, or in this case at the end of the campaign event it was built for. So, this environment for access lasted one day and for one person.

SLIDE In the 1940s and 50s this started to change, but the government's interest in access was never for the entirety of the disabled population – instead it tended to focus on disabled veterans and polio survivors as two seemingly deserving groups. Even with them, however, the

right to access was provisional. The University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign hosted the largest college program for students with disabilities, with over 100 students in the Rehabilitation Center program at the University by the early 1950s. The program oversaw dozens of buildings being ramped and modified to improve wheelchair access, and by 1953 the University had an unprecedented rule that all new construction had to include wheelchair access. But still, this access was delivered as a kind of bare minimum; the ramps were quite steep and narrow, never marked by specific signage, and the University's administrator insisted that all students be able to navigate them alone without help, even in Illinois winters. This was access as a part of rehabilitation – something delivered by medical and social service experts with the idea that it was part of overcoming disability and proving one's worth in society.

SLIDE So, by contrast, when we talk about the history of access in Berkeley we are talking about a more community driven change. The man for whom this building is named, Ed Roberts, was as many of you likely know a part of a small group of wheelchair users who lived in the top of UC Berkeley's Cowell Hospital in the 1960s.

- Merging individual skills with broader politics of the period – Ed was a poli sci major, others were studying nonprofit development and city planning to gain more of a big picture view
- Though not all Cal students – this history includes a number of residents of Berkeley, attendants, fellow travelers

SLIDE There's a strong overlap with the university's history of protests and conflict in the 1960s – specifically, conflicts over the use of public space. In 1968, locals claimed an

undeveloped lot that the University planned to develop into high-rise dormitories. Dubbing the site People's Park, hippies and other green-space-minded residents dug up the parking lot there, dug trees, built paths, and set up a stage for political speeches.

In 1969 the University fenced off the land, and there were renewed protests. Governor Ronald Reagan called in State Troops and tear gassed the campus. One protester was killed by State troops; tens or maybe hundreds of thousands marched the next day. Once State troops left, the University agreed to lease the park to the city, as it remains – though not without conflict as there are new debates over it every few decades.

SLIDE one of the surprising outcomes of the Peoples Park crisis is that there were some moves to accommodate the cause rather than simply quash it. The city of Berkeley resolved after the conflict to protect the park, to build public bathrooms and other amenities, and to widen the sidewalks. When they did so in late 1970, they also added 5 blocks of what they called “curb ramps” along Telegraph, Bancroft to Dwight.

These early ramps are somewhat hard to track down, but city spec drawings show them as the flattening of the curb into the street at the corner, with no marking on the pavement. I believe we may be looking at them in a picture included in a CIL publication of 1984 – two women on Telegraph, one pushing the other's wheelchair, with what seems to me to be a curved concrete curb with a bricked street.

In any case, these curbs were welcomed by the local disabled community. The Rolling Quads wrote a letter to the City thanking them for the installation and suggesting some changes right

off the bat, as one of the ramps was blocked by a parking meter.

SLIDE CIL was founded in 1972, and one of the early divisions was called “Community Affairs” – Hale Zukas defined this area as “working to improve the physical and social environment for disabled people.” A lot of this was accessibility in the early days. One of the projects Community Affairs took on was a local survey of streets, identifying which would be ideal as a next phase for the city to make into cuts or ramps. Here are some of the key players in that team – in the center, Eric Dibner, a young man with glasses and a bushy beard, pushing the chrome metal wheelchair of Hale Zukas, who is easily identifiable by his cap-mounted headstick. These are the early battery-powered wheelchairs but I’m guessing Eric might have just finished hoisting Hale up the curb, as an unidentified man is doing for an unidentified woman – I haven’t been able to identify here. Eric and Ken Stein helped me identify Dick Santos, all the way to the left, a blind teammate on this project.

SLIDE A city planning student named Ruth Grimes worked with the group to develop a list of over 200 curbs recommended for ramping by the city; and the city ordered 125 to be constructed to start with, in 1973. The map shows the University, with the original district that had already been renovated, filled in with its parallel streets, including the blocks around People’s Park; then with three kind of sub districts: a mile long route stretching down Telegraph to Ashby Avenue. Then, a strip around downtown Berkeley and the BART there. Finally a small cluster on Adeline around Ashby, where we are right now – at the Ashby BART station.

This “wheelchair route” as the CIL mappers called it, was the first contiguous district built for wheelchair access in the US and I would guess the world. There were precursors in terms of

college campuses and hospitals, but not connecting transit, commerce, schools, and parks in this way.

SLIDE The wheelchair route also incorporated another local design contribution. Once the first round of ramps were built on Telegraph, the community had noted that the flattened curbs did not work well for blind pedestrians who need to detect the edge of a curb with a cane or their feet. Hale Zukas designed an alternative curb cut that was to the side of a crosswalk, and a rather steep, sharp cut.

Maybe more important than the wheelchair route within the city was another resolution that required the city to consult with the disabled community whenever it undertook major city planning and development.

- Significant as a longer lasting principle than a given round of construction
- Very different from national trend of rehab, charitable groups developing codes so that no person would be needed to consult or weigh in on a project
- Seems to directly reflect the experience of the curb cuts, in which they needed a second round of revisions - or third, fourth etc.

SLIDE What I observed in researching the book is that the curb cut story seems to be just one episode in developing a culture of access in Berkeley and its surrounding area. But Access was not a stand alone demand – it was almost always framed within the larger issue of improving housing, transportation or job options. Under Hale Zukas and Eric Dibner, the Community Affairs desk would provide simple plans and small grants to local residents to build ramps or

other home renovations to make housing in the area accessible. These grants along with local advocacy with transit organizations and local businesses built local expertise and a kind of distinctive personality to accessible home design. In the 1980s Michael Chacko Daniels, a poet who worked for CIL, put together these publications that documented local forms of access – Going Where you Wheel on Telegraph Avenue told the story of curb cuts and what it was like to be in this vibrant counterculture neighborhood where access was a part of the local eclecticism. Ramps are Beautiful was even more specifically focused on architectural design and included technical details on basic ramp design.

SLIDE – it showed some of the projects that CIL had consulted on – a ramp for a Filipino American man, Marcelino Entes, and another for an African American woman who lived with her daughter. In both cases, the families had made do with less functional alternatives – Entes being dragged up and down stairs by his sons, Dixon with a makeshift ramp that felt unstable and too steep. One thing I notice as a design historian is how the ramps are front and center on the houses – totally visible from the street, not at all hidden behind. But also that they are a source of pride and social life – both articles talk about how a disabled family member has a harder time socializing with neighbors, but then the ramp can create this additional semi public space around the house. The photos also show CIL’s reach into more diverse populations of Berkeley and Oakland rather than just the focus on UC graduates, many of whom were white middle-class men who were often more focused on living alone rather than this kind of intergenerational household.

SLIDE – The distinctive form of access here also shaped the University and some of its

approaches to teaching about disability and with disabled students. The architectural work of CIL was also influential on Raymond Lifchez, a professor at the University, who conducted a number of projects to center disabled participants and designers in the studio. Lifchez had a student who was among the disabled students organization, Mary Ann Hiserman, and recognized the expertise she was bringing into the classroom. He invited Hiserman as well as other disabled residents of Berkeley – many of them part of CIL – to consult with the class, and he developed accessible model discussions. Here in the photo we see a range of people, wheelchair users and not, gathered around a low table with a model of an apartment complex. The pieces come apart and could be passed around, annotated, rearranged – all of these things seem to aim at demystifying the process and involving people in a hands on way.

SLIDE As we look back on this history, we can start to recognize the local layers of infrastructure that reflect different kinds of involvement of local advocates as well as the legal stages of access requirements. The kind of rough, corner curb angle that we see on a lot of side streets especially is a distinct design compared to the 1990s-ish addition of concrete grading to add a bit of texture to the curbs in recognition of blind pedestrians. More recently we see these bumpy yellow strips which some appreciate, but I also hear a lot that these cause issues for wheelchair wheels and especially walkers and other wheeled devices. These are a sort of living museum of accessible design, though I think they are rarely treasured as historical artifacts.

As I wrap up here I want to address one persistent story that popped up a lot in my research. There's a certain myth to the Rolling Quad generation and the idea that they were breaking barriers. One story that persists is the idea that Roberts and others were out in the middle of

the night breaking curbs and repaving them. This is, for whatever it's worth, just a story. I'll read the part of my book that addresses this.

the myth of guerilla curb paving captures the spirit of the work that disabled people and their attendants performed in Berkeley in the 1960s and 1970s. It also suggests a search for remnants of the earliest disability rights history in Berkeley: the idea that perhaps somewhere, in a dark alley, there is a homemade curb cut that speaks to the tenacity of the Rolling Quads. This is a poignant search, given that little evidence of the earliest forms of access in Berkeley survives: neither the original curb cuts on Telegraph, nor the early office spaces of PDSP and CIL, nor even the Cowell Hospital building where the Rolling Quads made a makeshift dormitory remain standing. The myth of spontaneous curb construction is, in part, a search for a monument to the work that was done without recognition at the time. The search is so strong that there was for a time a plaque on Shattuck Avenue marking Berkeley's first curb cut – this seems, from my research at least, to be an incorrect labeling.

The lack of monument to Berkeley's early era of accessible design is, perhaps, as informative as any historical marker. Whether documented in Lifchez's classes, sketched in CIL's *Ramps Are Beautiful*, or in still-standing buildings, the Berkeley style of accessible design has an ephemeral quality. Accessible housing was, and still is, difficult to find, and once found, was subject to the whims of changing real estate, landlords, and government income support. If this was the architecture of the Disability Rights, it also signified the contingent nature of many disabled people's living situations. In 2011, when CIL moved to a state-of-the-art new building named for Ed Roberts, it marked the end of an era on Telegraph Avenue. The new building is distinct from the university, linked instead by an elevator to the regional BART network and through satellite offices to Oakland and other less affluent parts of the Bay Area. A condominium building slated to be built on the site of CIL offices, moreover, indicates the ongoing gentrification and real estate pressures of twenty-first-century Berkeley.