

## Disability History Association Podcast

Interview with Bess Williamson

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**Caroline Lieffers:** Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers and it's my pleasure today to be talking to Dr. Bess Williamson. Bess is an Associate Professor of Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is the author of *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design*, which came out last year. Bess, thank you so much for taking the time to join me today.

**Bess Williamson:** Thank you, Caroline.

**Caroline Lieffers:** So I want to start, if you don't mind, by having you tell me a little bit about how you got interested in this intersection between disability and design.

**Bess Williamson:** Yes. Well, I am a historian, but I have a few different disciplines in the mix. So, I have my PhD in History with an emphasis on American Civilization, so kind of an interdisciplinary degree. But my background is in the history of design within technological history. So, I had been working on the ways in which designers kind of critiqued American society in the later twentieth century, right? We think of the 1960s and sort of environmentalism and the greater awareness of US industrial production in the world and inequality and so on. And I noticed that designers who were mentioning that also were mentioning disability. So sort of in the same breath, they were saying, you know, things are polluting and they're too expensive and they don't work that well, and they're reflective of the waste-makers, the tastemakers, and so on. And they were saying they don't work for disabled people. And it really occurred to me that those things aren't always discussed together today.

And I realized as I looked further into it that actually there had been lots done in that area, right? There's lots of stuff to look at when we talk about accessibility, you know. Different kinds of curb cuts, ramps, you know, speaking computers, all kinds of things, whereas when we think about environmentalism, a lot of the ideas have never come to pass, right, you know: changes in energy sources and materials and so on. And so, from the standpoint of a history graduate student, I was pretty excited at the prospect of having a lot of stuff to look at. And so that sort of brought me to understand this topic and realize almost nothing had been written by that time, historicizing the changes in the physical environment that we call accessibility.

**Caroline:** So, your book identifies the postwar era in particular as being a really important period of change for disability and design. Can you start by just kind of talking us through that moment?

**Bess:** Yes, of course. So, you know, one of the things I realized, right as I, as I started to look kind of, you know, earlier than the 1960s of where this critique was coming from is recognizing that a huge cultural change in the way that Americans—and really people worldwide viewed disability—was occurring right in the mid twentieth century because of the convergence of two major factors: the end of World War II and the return of disabled veterans from that war, and the polio epidemic, which was the focus of, you know, very advanced media and philanthropic campaigns. So, both of these populations of disabled veteran and polio survivor were seen as

sympathetic and greatly deserving of everything that the affluent American postwar society had to offer.

So these, I see a direct connection between these events and the growing sort of notion over the last half of the twentieth century that something should be done in the public to make everyday streets, sidewalks, transportation, and so on accessible. So, while, you know, historians of the twentieth century and of the US will recognize that Franklin Delano Roosevelt was president ending in 1945, he, you know, he's an example of someone who handled disability almost entirely as a private issue, right? He was wealthy; he relied on his son to help him walk. He had, you know, a hand-driven car and so on. But not changes in the broader public that really came sort of after his lifetime. So ,in the 1950s and 1960s.

**Caroline:** And you talk a little bit about rehabilitation hospitals and the Institute for Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation in your book. And these stories can often be kind of mixed for disabled people. But you do mention that there were some technologies and some advocacy work that came out of those sites, right? So can you kind of talk me through some of this complicated history?

**Bess:** Yes. You know, and here is where – yeah, exactly. I came across a complicated example, right. As we often do once we go to the sources of history, which is that the very same places where many disabled people experienced, had a very negative experience of disability, of tremendous pressure, of diagnosis, of being kind of forced to perform in a particular way, including sometimes like being on, you know, poster children on telethons and so on, were those places which are these postwar sites of rehabilitation, of a particular medical treatment that's only focused on rehabilitation. It's also a site of tremendous amount of, kind of creative energy around what we now call accessibility. Because those professionals who are working in these rehabilitation hospitals, you know, doctors, social workers, physical and occupational therapists are very focused on returning disabled people back into the mainstream, they are very focused on the inaccessibility of that mainstream world, because they see that as like, that's what ends up being the barrier, not their patient's, you know, paralysis or their difficulty walking or their blindness or whatever. But that it's a technological problem.

So, there's a curious contradiction. And I really find that contradiction in the figure of Howard Rusk, the, who is an army, sorry, an Air Force doctor who really, who founded the field of rehabilitation medicine in many ways in the postwar US. He founded this major center at NYU Bellevue Hospital, which still exists and is now called Rusk Rehabilitation. And he was so fixated on what he called rehabilitation from bed to job, right? So, with this specific outcome of being employed, of being independent. He put a tremendous amount of pressure on his patients. And there are narratives of people saying, you know, that he sort of forced them to walk when they really, you know, couldn't, and so on. But at the same time, he did a lot of advocacy around access. So he, for example, consulted on an architectural project in Florida to build accessible housing, which is the first like planned housing development that is wheelchair accessible. He advocated with the Mayor's Office of New York to put an elevator in City Hall. Right? The New York Public Library to have a ramp. All of these kinds of things. So there's this curious kind of combination of encouragement and pressure that is wrapped up in that rehabilitation.

But more than anything, I'd say significantly, while there's a big emphasis on technology, the lens is very, kind of patriarchal, right? And I'd say patronizing in terms of saying, like, that people need to prove themselves and need to overcome in order to kind of deserve to be in an accessible context.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. And when we're talking about these often government-sponsored and/or hospital based efforts in particular, are they just about that from bed to job thing, or do they ever try to consider the person's life sort of in a more holistic way?

**Bess:** Well, I think that, you know, the narrative is often from bad to job, right? But then once you look more specifically at people's actual lives, the story is more, more mixed. Right? Where you have people, for example, who maybe can't work full time outside of the house but have home businesses, right? Or are working part time. Or, you know, interestingly, Rusk starts to get involved in the late 1940s and 1950s in a massive project on so-called handicapped housewives, right? So very much defining the home as a workplace for women, right? So, he saw he calls the handicapped housewife like the largest vocational group of disabled people.

But of course, fixing up a house to make it accessible is very different from making, you know, a factory floor, because people, other people live there, you know, shared workspaces or home spaces. So I think once he starts paying attention to the house, it kind of explodes that focus on the job, because you start to realize like we're also focusing on, you know, going to the bathroom and brushing your teeth, and doing your makeup, right? Those aren't exactly specific vocational tasks, right? So that actually brings kind of a broader definition of what accessibility might be. And in particular, you see disabled people sort of holding onto those tasks and defining them for themselves as a part of their own personal independence, right? Which means I don't have to ask someone else for help to eat or, you know, put on lipstick or whatever. Not necessarily defining it in terms of productive, you know, paying labor.

**Caroline:** This actually brings me to you, I think what might be one of my favorite chapters in your book, which is about the tinkerers. So you mention people like Ida Brinkman and her family who did the sort of improvisational or kind of DIY disability design. And you have some incredible sources and places where people would share tips and tricks with each other. So, can you talk me through a little bit about this research and what you found about DIY disability design?

**Bess:** Yeah, and this is a real, you know, like historian's, you know, delightful moment of, you know, I just sort of, I was doing a fellowship at the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, and I went to the National Library of Medicine in Maryland and was just like kind of checking out every, or viewing every book they had, that was like, had the word "disabled," "crippled," so and so, you know, sort of from a time period. And I came across this periodical, the *Toomey J. Gazette*, which I don't want to, you know, I didn't discover, others had written about it, but it hadn't been very well known, which was like a Zine for polio survivors. And it's just an amazing, rich resource of people's photographs of their own homes, drawings of, you know, real and imagined idealized products that they wish they could use and that they're tinkering and making at home. And just wild stories of people, you know, cutting their cars in half and figuring out how to use them with a wheelchair and all kinds of, you know, things that really show a group of people, a particular demographic of people, I think mostly white middle class people, who end up living at home, maybe they're living with their families, maybe they're living on their own. Like Ida Brinkman, who is a married woman with children who got polio, so she moved back in with her husband and children and narrates like all of the things that she needs in everyday life, right? So a foot-operated phone so she can call for an emergency if she's with her children; a typewriter or rather a, she alters the chest shell respirator that she has to help her breathe so that she can reach past it to type

on a typewriter with, using a mouth stick, right? So, these are just tremendous and very specific, very customized technologies that people are developing on their own.

And I say this is a historian's delight for many reasons, but particularly because it gives us an insight into what the quote-unquote "patients" or, the recipients, or the users of these technologies were doing, which we so rarely get, right? We usually have doctor's accounts or publications or, you know, advertisements or patents by technology makers. We so rarely get that sort of primary source of people actually doing stuff. So it revealed to me a tremendous creative culture of people making access in their own homes, which of course, then extends, I think, really, throughout the history of disability in the modern world when people have always been altering and adapting and figuring out how to use tools that might not be designed for them to make everyday life work with disability.

**Caroline:** I want to push a little bit at this issue of class and race, and also if you want to talk about, gender, because I imagine these experiences were not shared by everyone. Not everybody had access to some of these technologies in the first place and/or these means in which to sort of share their discoveries. So, if you could talk me through a little bit of the race, class, gender implications of this, that would be really great.

**Bess:** Yes. And this is where I really draw on, I make reference to the, the overall literature about the postwar citizenship in the United States, right? That this is a time of tremendous government generosity in the form of social programs, particularly for veterans, right? Like the G.I. Bill or the Servicemen's Rehabilitation Act of 1944, which provided veterans with, you know, home mortgages, college education, and broadened health care, right? The literature on these, on these programs has been for, for, you know, a couple of decades now, really emphasizing the ways in which it defines citizenship unequally, right? That those who had access to these programs were able to tremendously expand their social mobility, their economic possibilities, and so on. But if they were in various marginalized categories, they were unlikely to access them. So, for example, living in the segregated South, right? Black veterans were not able to attend certain kinds of colleges or certainly buy mortgages because of the larger structural conditions. Or women, the few women who were eligible for the G.I. Bill, you know, couldn't get a mortgage without a husband. You know, these kinds of dimensions of inequality that were part of the larger society.

And this I find to be true also with disability and access, where disabled people are under sort of a double pressure to perform not only as disabled people fitting into an inaccessible world, but also to sort of over-perform their expected gender roles. So for men, for veterans in particular, I noted that a lot of accessible technologies really emphasize independence from a woman, right? So feeding yourself is about being, not being supported by your wife, right? Or working or dressing or whatever. That there is again and again this sort of emphasis on being independent specifically in order to sort of be a conventional husband to still, you know, push a lawnmower, to drive a car, these kinds of things. Whereas for women, it's about still being able to perform the roles of a conventional housewife under significant pressure, which is to not be left alone as a woman who might have more limited access.

So, I say I found these remarkable sources and I was delighted to find them. But I also need to recognize that the disabled, the population of disabled people who were able to move into single family houses, to make their own access, to attend college in the postwar period were also already in a white, middle class, heterosexual kind of expected normative group. I found very little evidence of nonwhite disabled people

living at home in this period. And I'm not saying that means that they were not, but just they weren't represented in the literature. And I think that it was probably much more difficult, right? The postwar suburban house is much easier to make accessible than like a tenement style house in the city. And so, my sense is that, and from the little bit of representation and I've found, is that, in particular, that black disabled people were more likely to be institutionalized or in some kind of community care in this time period rather than living on their own or even being given the message that independence was kind of a goal. But that area remains really challenging from a, from a research standpoint because like black polio survivors are almost completely invisible in the, in the medical record, in the sort of medical literature of this period, as are disabled veterans. So, I think that, that normative story also kind of dominates over the sources and makes it very difficult to get a sense of, kind of, what were people experiencing across different demographics.

**Caroline:** Absolutely, yeah. I want to pick up on the universities thread in particular because you mentioned that a couple of times in your previous answer. And you have a chapter about Berkeley as a kind of hotbed for disability activism. So, tell me about when that started and what some of the key developments were in that regard.

**Bess:** Yeah, so this is a story that is probably the most known to any disability historian in the US. And I hope it's getting to be known more broadly by historians of civil rights or of, you know, of the protest movements of the 1960s, that there is a small group of disabled veteran, sorry, of disabled students, for the most part, not veterans, I should say -- for the most part, polio survivors and people with spinal cord injuries, who became the first residents of a specially designed dormitory on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley. And just to note briefly, right, they were not the first disabled college students by any means. There is a whole program for disabled college students in Illinois that I also cover from an earlier period. But they, they really take hold of the politics of the moment to assert a kind of independence and self-advocacy that is unparalleled at that time. And so, they kind of emerge as a hotbed for the American Disability Rights Movement. And I think they, they provide a really helpful kind of window into the ways that disabled people shifted or were able to translate their own individual experiences navigating the medical and social bureaucracy of the postwar period into a form of self-advocacy and a political movement, right? Rather than just, if we talk about the difference between sort of individual success as opposed to structural change, where they translated their own individual superstardom or as they would call it, you know, supercrip kind of status of being the first disabled person to, you know, hold a certain kind of job or graduated from college or whatever into an advocacy movement. So, I look at the ways that this group of students who have been covered in a variety of other disability histories, but the way that they translated their advocacy on their own part to just attend college into advocacy for access on a broad scale in Berkeley.

So, they become activists for widespread change, leading to the first contiguous wheelchair accessible district in the US. I don't know if that, that resonates, but rather than just, you know, an individual courthouse or an individual block having ramps, they worked with the city planning department to map out like more than hundred curb cuts that were built over the early 1970s in Berkeley. So we think of the difference, right, between just being able to get into one building as opposed to being able to travel on your own and, like, stop at a coffee shop, stop at a bookstore, take the subway, you know, connect the university to other places in the city. So, they established the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley, which remains one of the premier kind of grassroots community-based disability organizations, right, as opposed to that rehabilitation hospital model that I mentioned before, which is much

more of a kind of expert, professional-driven. This is a community-driven kind of advocacy organization.

**Caroline:** You also talk about legislative changes that made a difference for disabled people. So the Architectural Barriers Act in 1968. In 1977, activism helped lead to enforcement of Section 504 of an earlier Rehabilitation Act. And I'm curious about whether you think this sort of legislative change was essential to improving access for people with disabilities, or does it reflect changes that were already happening or is it a little bit of both? I mean, which is the chicken? Which is the egg? You know?

**Bess:** Right. Of course, you know, as any historian tell you, a little bit of both. But I do think that, you know, one of the reasons this project appealed to me is that it's distinctly US American, right? Each country really has its distinct disability histories because of distinct legal systems, right, and legal milestones. So, the Architectural Barriers Act, the idea of a federal act, right? That it's not enough to just have local codes, all of which sort of mismatch. But this is a federal priority specifically tied to kind of the rights of veterans in 1968. And then in 1973, the Rehabilitation Act uses specific civil rights language, uses anti-discrimination language to define physical disability as a protected category. But maybe most significantly, these legal statutes proved to be not enough by themselves, right? In both cases, the laws don't really do anything because there's no enforcement, there's no specific regulations sort of indicating what those, those statutes really mean. So, in the case of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, as other disability historians can also, have also written about, there's kind of this moment where legislators put in that disability is a protected category for discrimination in federal programs, but they don't really say what that means, right? So, we think about this from the standpoint of like a public bus. If a bus stops and nobody says, like, deliberately says to a disabled person, you can't get on, is that enough to pass the sort of legal litmus test for nondiscrimination or does the bus itself need to be usable by that person, right? So if we think of a bus that doesn't have any kind of wheelchair lift, is that a form of discrimination? And so, there's a back and forth legally about this question for quite a few years with no regulations. And it's not until a national protest movement in 1977 that there is a signed regulation specifically saying what this form of anti-discrimination means: that there needs to be specific number of ramps of, you know, accessible parking spaces and bathrooms and so on. So there is, in this case, I think there's a very evident need for a pairing of the law with, you know, measures of enforcement that require the kind of public outcry to make them happen.

**Caroline:** No, that that makes a lot of sense. I want to follow up on this buses issue as well, because this was a volatile public issue starting in the 70s and not resolved until well after, in fact, some might argue it's still not been resolved today. So, can you talk us through this story and the important work that activists like the ADAPT movement, for example, contributed to this, this particular issue?

**Bess:** Yes. So, you know, so as I mentioned, there's this period of the 1970s of a lot of conflict between sort of local disability rights groups that are growing across the country and legislators where, you know, there's a kind of pushback, like everyone can say, oh, we want to, quote, help the handicapped, you know, people are on the side of disabled veterans and so on, but they're not willing to kind of put the teeth into the law to make it happen. And as a result, there are a lot of public fights over particular facilities, right? Around schools, and whether they're accessible. Around public transportation in particular. And I argue that the bus issue really did a lot to establish what we now know of this conflict, which is the idea that accessible design is like nice to have, but really difficult to get. That it's inconvenient; that it's expensive;

that it requires a lot of retrofitting and, you know, special technology; that it's a difficult process. Because what I've found before then is that, you know, while there aren't national laws that are well enforced, the overall attitude is like this is not that difficult, right? You can, you know, adding a ramp, planning that it, it's possible. Whereas the really clear backlash, the strength of city mayors and lobbying groups for the transportation industry specifically cast this as like asking too much. And there are headlines such as *The New York Times* editorial in, I think it's 1980 or 1979 that it says, "Must every bus kneel to the disabled?" Like as if these are like bowing down to this difficult lobby. And there's, there's quote after quote and sort of article after article in which people say, you know, this is putting an undue burden on the broad public, because of the inconvenience of shutting down subway systems to renovate them or redesigning buses. But it's also, it's a real sort of PR public discussion about what is the kind of threshold for access: How much is enough? And this, there starts to be this kind of specter of the disabled lobby that is like asking too much when they're asking for various levels of access.

**Caroline:** And then is that resolved? I mean, what is your take on this?

**Bess:** Well, the way it's resolved is through compromise. That is largely, is largely resolved through sorry, through, through private industry kind of compromise. So that GM, General Motors, the largest maker of public buses by this time in the US, says, you know, we have the accessible bus, but it, it's this model in which the wheelchair lift is in the back door which, you know, even just symbolically we can think about what that kind of means of having the wheelchair lift in the back of the bus rather than the front. But also, just logistically what that means: the bus has to stop; the bus driver has to go in the back; they're often broken; they have a special key. All this kind of thing that the compromise is that the law allows, the lawsuits, allow for the buses to go ahead with kind of an existing model rather than producing a more inclusive, more accessible model.

And I think this compromise really comes out of a kind of push for a quote-unquote "business friendly" approach to access, which continues. And I think that that approach does imprint itself on the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in which there are the broadest regulations for access on a federal level than there ever have been. But they tend to put the burden on disabled people to ask for access rather than on businesses. Like there's no measure to survey businesses over time or on their level of accessibility, right. So, there's I think this compromise, the compromise that comes out of the trends bus issue has its echoes in ongoing accessibility regulations.

**Caroline:** Absolutely. Just to pivot a little bit, you also talk about a surge in basically mainstream disability design, you know, starting in the 1970s, carrying on from there. So, tell me a little bit about this area of accessible design.

**Bess:** So this is another place where we might think of a contradiction, right? So, on the one hand, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, there are these raging lawsuits. I didn't really get to this before. But ADAPT, the activist organization is like chaining itself to, you know, the hotel conferences where the public transit associations are meeting. You know, there's much more sort of a spike in, in conflict over this. Yet at the same time in the design world, there is a surprising kind of optimism around accessibility. And I would say not so much in the realm that's covered by federal law in terms of architecture, public transportation, but in the consumer products realm. So, in the area of, you know, household consumer electronics and appliances where designers are saying, we can add this in and actually it's going to bring about a better

outcome. So, I mention a few key products of the 1980s and 1990s: the Cuisinart food processor, Oxo good grips - the sort of rubber, large, chunky, rubber-handled kitchen tools, as consumer products that did very well in the market and which were designed based on studies of disability. So, while they're not marketed as kind of adaptive equipment, they're not sold through medical technology companies, their designers had studied with particular disabilities in order to produce them. And in some ways, this represents a kind of a sort of a third way in terms of this discussion, right? That it's not so much either the compromise of disability or the, the just intractability of organizations that refuse to comply with the law. But in fact, there is this creative option, which seems to benefit both businesses and disabled people in terms of having more usable products out there.

**Caroline:** Was there ever any pushback either from the public or within the design community where people didn't want these products or they thought they were ugly or something like that?

**Bess:** I would say not so much pushback as much as a kind of you know, there's a, there's a certain neutrality or sort of lack of discussion. So in the case of Oxo Good Grips, when I mentioned that many people are familiar with that story, are they may, they may have a sense, even just from looking at them like these are super usable, right? So, it's maybe not a surprise to know that one of the designers was a woman, you know, who had arthritis and her husband was a professional designer and that they worked together to develop these. It might not be such a surprise. But the Cuisinart is more of a surprise. In fact, I've had people say, oh, you know, like I buy it with Oxo Good Grips, but I'm not so sure with the Cuisinart. And I say, you know, this is not my opinion. This is based on archival evidence. The designer, you know, took notes on his own advertisements, you know, sort of pointing out their benefits in terms of, you know, if you think of the Cuisinart has these like big block buttons rather than all the teeny tiny little buttons that might be on a cheaper kind of blender. You know, these are specifically designed around studies on manual impairments and arthritis and so on. So it's not, you know, a guess on my part. I know that's how they were designed, but they've never been advertised that way, right?

So you can question what their benefit is for disabled people, right? They may be usable, but they're, first of all, kind of an expensive luxury product, but they also do nothing to kind of challenge the taboo around disability, right? They just sort of introduce themselves and say nothing after that. So, I think the question is not so much about backlash as kind of the deeper question, I guess, of whether this significantly changes anybody's attitudes about disability to bring it culturally more into the mainstream. And I'm not sure how much those products do, or perhaps they even suggest a bit of a kind of secrecy, like this is out there, but you have to know about it and ask about it, right? Rather than, we're going to have lots of like beautiful disabled people using them in an advertisement or something like that, that kind of a more, deeper cultural change.

**Caroline:** Thank you so much, Bess. I'm curious about this concept of universal design, which in your book you mentioned comes from this designer named Ron Mace. I mean, in your sense, did it live up to its promise and what did it get right versus what's still an issue?

**Bess:** Right. So, Ronald Mace is a super interesting character. And I just want to mention that my colleague Aimi Hamraie has written a brilliant book that came out just a little bit before mine called *Building Access*, which focuses even more on Mace and kind of his circle and the ideas that circulated in the 1980s to produce universal



design. But Mace is a really interesting figure: he's a disabled architect. He had polio as a child, so, he's also part of that kind of generation that, you know, sort of fended for themselves and then produced broader change. But he coined this term after having been an architect for almost 20 years and working on accessibility, and he penned many of the kind of federal regulations, and so he was a real kind of in the trenches accessible designer. But I think he saw the appeal of a different term, right? His own company had been called Barrier-Free Environments, right? It's like the least sexy way to describe accessibility, is just like barrier-free, right? And I think he recognized the need for a word that sounded like, positive, around accessibility, right? Universal Design: a goal that truly everyone can embrace. That said, he recognized that it wasn't a cure all, right? That it wasn't, there often wasn't a single solution that could truly be usable by people of all range of disabilities, or that could be seamlessly integrated.

And I think sometimes, as Aimi writes about very usefully, sometimes there's a kind of attitude in the design world that universal design is kind of a fix for this problem, right? That there is a, that design can change everything. And that, in fact, as we can see in this history, there have often been pushbacks and compromises and kind of internal contradictions in these designs. And the idea of universal design can sometimes, I think, oversimplify or make it seem as if this is an easy choice or just quote-unquote "commonsense," as Aimi mentions in their own writing. And I think the notion of commonsense kind of can sometimes erase the work of activists who very much had to make their case and were very much opposed by people who thought it was not commonsense. In fact, still, we hear about the idea that accessibility is not commonsense, right, like just, be just be sensible, not everyone can have access, this sort of thing. So, so I think sometimes the rhetoric of universal design can be challenging. That said, I still think, you know, I'm a Ron Mace fan. I think he should be getting a lot of attention in the history of design, not only for his personal story, but for the ways in which he mingled an extremely practical approach to making access, you know, really doing the work of drawing out the options, of charting the course, with always having a kind of understanding of the bigger picture: that design is a process over time, that it needs community engagement, that it needs revision and review and so on.

**Caroline:** What do you see as some of the major access or design issues that are still out there when it comes to disability?

**Bess:** Well, I've had some interesting discussions in the last few years as our politics, right - I was wrapping up this book right in the year or so after the Trump election. And I think, you know, I wrote it in a time of greater optimism around kind of the America's social programs and rights discourse. And since 2016 or even, you know, since a little bit earlier, being aware of the pushback against the ADA, there are ever new, renewed pushes in the US political context to repeal virtually all aspects of the ADA. So, I think the ADA is very much still a very relevant piece of legislation to consider and also to think about the conditions under which it was passed, right? That it was passed by a bipartisan group who very much emphasized kind of the individual disabled citizen and consumer as its focus. And today that there is much greater skepticism on the right toward any kind of political, of social programs, right, of so-called entitlements, food stamps, welfare and so on. And that the ADA often, accessibility kind of gets lumped in that. So, unfortunately, I find that on the eve of the thirtieth anniversary of the ADA that it feels as endangered as it ever has been.

At the same time, there's a much broader grasp of the variations of disability itself. And I will 100 percent accept the potential critique of my own book as very focused on

physical, mobility-related disability. But I think, you know, in part it reflects like the tenor of the conversation and who was involved in the conversation during the late twentieth century.

But more recently were much more aware, I think, of the breadth of disability to include, you know, chronic illness, to include learning, intellectual, sensory conditions and so on. And so that, so access itself becomes a much broader scope and discussion, right? That it's not just like, you install a ramp and then you're done, right? But that there's a wide range of potential things, both physical and not, and ephemeral or structural, that could be addressed in terms of access. So, I think those are some of the big changes.

I'd say also in the design world, although I mentioned quite a few people in my book, including Ron Mace and all those people tinkering at home who are disabled people making design change, I'd say at the time of the late twentieth century, the conversation is almost entirely about how designers can improve access for an imagined other people, which are disabled people, whereas I think that current discussion is very much about how more disabled people are becoming designers, right? Sort of speaking their own truth, whether they're artists or performers, models, movie stars, or just people who are being educated in the professions of design. So, I think that significantly changes kind of the discussion as quote-unquote "the disabled" become not some imagined group out there, but at the very same people who are in the room making decisions about design.

**Caroline:** Instead of just designing for access or something like that, it becomes a space for creativity and personal expression and all that kind of stuff. Yeah. For people who are interested in this history and maybe want to do a little bit of research themselves or visit some museums, maybe cruise around in some online collections. Are there any particular collections that you consulted that were really useful or that you'd recommend people go to if they're excited about disability and design?

**Bess:** Absolutely. Well, the major source for any US historian of disability, of the disability rights movement is the Disability Rights and Independent Living Movement Collection at UC Berkeley.

And they have quite a strength in their online collection. I really wouldn't have been able to do that part of the project without their extensive oral history collection that includes both people who were sort of active in the Berkeley scene as well as others, you know, architects, people who worked in the movement from other parts of the US and even, there's somewhat of a global representation in that collection. So that's a major source for just, I think, general disability activism history.

You know, to speak a little bit to the ways in which the Disability History Association has also contributed to my work over time, that one of my dissertation committee members was Paul Longmore, who did so much to kind of bring me into the network of other historians and that, I think, the conversations among disability historians is also, you know, a significant contribution. And I always want to encourage people who are like really in the field also to look, Paul also has an oral history that's in the Berkeley collection, and he tells some interesting stories about sort of the, the road to becoming an academic as well, which kind of, you know, intersect with what we're doing.

The other collection and I would say person without whom this project never would have been the same as Katherine Ott's curatorial work at the National Museum of

American History at the Smithsonian. Katherine is a remarkable mentor to so many of us disability, sort of, disability tech people and in academia. But in particular, just to think of a, of a medical curator, a curator of medicine and science who's done a significant amount of work, not about doctors and technical inventors, but about disabled people, you know, people who experience the medical profession from a consumer standpoint. So, and there's a great, Katherine has curated a wonderful collection of the Smithsonian's object collections that relate to disability that's called Every Body. I think it's one word, but the "body" is capitalized. So it's everybody.si.edu. That's just a wonderful kind of material history that ranges from, you know, institutionalization and asylum histories through to technologies of everyday life through to, you know, significant objects of activism and protest that relate to this history. So that's a wonderful collection that I use a lot in teaching as well as, you know, just sort of, as research.

**Caroline:** And as you've traveled around, I'm sure you did some, you know, press and stuff for this book where you gave talks and whatnot. Did you talk to members of various disability communities about their own thoughts on the history of design, and did they have stories to share? I mean, to what extent is this still like an ongoing conversation for you?

**Bess:** Oh, it is definitely an ongoing conversation in so many different ways. I mean, I think in almost any place we can talk about the spaces we're in and how they both allow and prevent access in different ways. I had such a pleasure being on a Texas NPR show called "Think" and, which is like a call-in show, and almost every person that called in was a disabled person talking about, sort of, local access issues. And one that was really interesting was a man was talking about being blind and living in a rural area. So public transportation was sort of an added challenge for him because of sort of limited routes and so on. But also, he sort of brought to my attention the ways in which cities, just because of their density of population, often, you know, have public transit systems that have to be more focused on like having, you know, many people on the bus all at the same time and they all may have different needs and so on, but that the rural routes really were not well equipped to, you know, be accessible. And so, it just revealed to me, I think, how local these issues are. We often have, sort of, favorite locales wherever we live that are sort of most accessible or that work best for us. And these are very distinct to wherever we may live.

**Caroline:** So you also have an Instagram account, accessible.design, if I've got that right. So, tell me about this account, what it does, how you got into it?

**Bess:** Well, I know it's always fun to share the objects and images that I come across, you know, as a, as a historian. I'm always sort of seeking out the spaces and print materials that sort of relate to this history. And so it's great to share them. And I think one area that I in particular often share on my Instagram that I maybe I don't write about as deliberately is, are areas of like museum and exhibition accessibility. Because, like, as someone who is a design historian, but also I work at an art school and connected to an art museum, I go to a lot of museum shows just all the time, you know, as I'm traveling or in my own local area in Chicago. And it's been really interesting to see how museum exhibitions are using different tools of access. So, for example, I went to an exhibition at the Chicago History Museum about Chicago's development of streamlined design like, you know, art deco, you know, telephones and appliances and so on that had that kind of streamlined 1930s look to them. And they had some touched objects, right, some cast solid objects of like telephones and an iron, I can't remember, that you could try out. And it was just really notable to me

how different kinds of museums have very different kinds of accessible exhibition objects, right?

In an art museum, I think it's rare to see, to see like a replica of an object that you can touch, although it occasionally happens. But, so, I've been very curious about that. So, I often share that kind of, of detail on my Instagram. I think I also think about how my personal Instagram has a sort of limit only, only so much interest in the very precise details of accessible design. And so, I thought perhaps I could share those beyond somebody, you know, my mother, who is mostly interested in pictures of my children and stuff.

**Caroline:** Well, we're all grateful to have these wonderful photos that you take from all the various places you visit and things you see. So, thank you for that. What else are you working on these days? I mean, congratulations on finishing this wonderful book. It's off your desk. It's out in the world. So, what are you doing with your time now?

**Bess:** Thanks. I'm doing, I have two different projects. I'm doing one, sort of, mini-project, which might be a small book or maybe just an essay about, kind of, changing attitudes towards the social purpose of design in the twenty years since September 11th, 2001, just because I've kind of noted both the lack of discussion of that event, but yet I think the last twenty years have been very significant for designers in terms of talking about their public role. So that's a little bit of a tangent from my own research.

But, as I mentioned, you know, one thing, one of the things I became aware of in writing the book was how I don't, didn't have great access for sort of what was going on outside of a kind of white, professionalized middle class, and in the US when it came to accessibility. And so I've been increasingly been interested in what I call "parallel design professions." So, professions like occupational therapy, social work, home economics that are particularly focused on the built environment but are not called design. These are areas that are much more likely to have women and people of color employed rather than design and architecture schools. And I am curious, I've sort of been researching a little bit how these specialized programs interact with a broader social, a broader spectrum of social, racial, economic groups in relationship to accessibility and other, kind of, domestic technology issues. As you may hear, that project is still very much in formation.

**Caroline:** That's okay. We've all been there. We'll look forward to seeing how it develops and changes shape over the next few years, so thank you. Thank you so much. It's just been wonderful to have you on the podcast and I really appreciate your time.

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**Caroline:** Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time. Bye bye!