

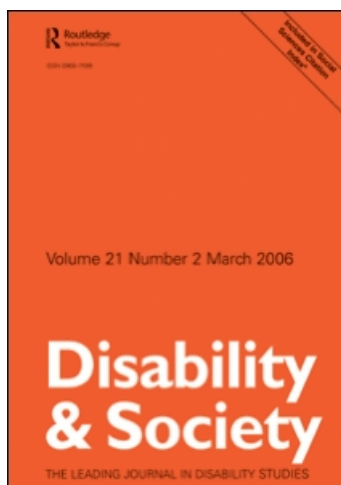
This article was downloaded by: [London School of Economics & Political Science]

On: 19 September 2010

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 768497711]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Disability & Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713393838>

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To cite this Article Ben-Moshe, Liat and Powell, Justin J.W.(2007) 'Sign of our times? Revis(it)ing the International Symbol of Access', *Disability & Society*, 22: 5, 489 — 505

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/09687590701427602

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09687590701427602>

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Sign of our times? Revis(it)ing the International Symbol of Access

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The International Symbol of Access (ISA), used in a variety of specific locations to represent purposely facilitated access, has become ubiquitous throughout the world within just a few decades. Found wherever people move in physical space and needing to navigate environmental barriers, this symbol is among the most widely recognized representations of disability. While it provides daily interactions with issues of accessibility and disability, its purposes and design in different cultural contexts are neither obvious nor uncontested. We sketch the origin, goals and critiques of this prominent symbol and discuss its functions, from way showing to identity construction and advocacy/activism. Finally, we examine current proposals for alternative symbols.

Introduction

The International Symbol of Access (ISA), used in a variety of specific locations to represent purposely facilitated access, has become ubiquitous throughout the world within just a few decades. As part of early attempts to communicate issues of accessibility, the (wheelchair) mobility symbol—and the related access symbols in the areas of vision and hearing—have become arguably the most widely recognized representations of disability. Alongside disabled individuals themselves these symbols provide daily interactions with issues of accessibility and disability. Whether taken for granted, accepted or modified, the current ISA has spread around the globe, where it exists on doors, throughout buildings and the streets leading to them and in bus terminals, train stations and airports. In short, the ISA can now be found wherever people move in physical space, needing to navigate, negotiate barriers and find their way.

Yet we know remarkably little about this symbol's relatively short but highly dynamic history. Even its purposes and functions in different local and national contexts are neither obvious nor uncontested. Why is the symbol needed? What

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meanings does the symbol have—for those who recognize it and for those who rely on it? Is it primarily a symbol of access or of disability? How and why was this particular design chosen? Does it facilitate or hinder inclusion?

To begin to address these questions, we first define symbols and signs and sketch the origin, goals, functions and critiques of this prominent pictogram. We further discuss the politics of disability representation relating especially to the functions of the ISA, from way showing to identity construction and advocacy/activism. Finally, we present a few recent proposals for alternative symbols.¹ Without (even preliminary) answers to such fundamental questions, attempts to significantly change, or indeed replace, the access symbol via legal intervention, policy implementation or direct activism by disability movements may well be unsatisfactory or unsuccessful.

Symbols and signs, pictograms and icons

The definition of basic concepts, from symbol and sign to pictogram, icon and logotype should precede any discussion of the ISA's history and utility. Symbols and signs represent a world of meanings in a single image. At its most essential a symbol represents an idea or an object, a quality or quantity. As a conceptual token a symbol alludes to culturally defined meanings, whether actions, characteristics or things, whereas a sign refers to something not apparent, such as an idea, a desire or a command (Oxford University Press, 1971). A symbol may be a heart representing love, while a sign could be a gesture, as in manual sign language, or a structure placed in a public space to convey information.

Pictograms, which sighted people continuously confront in everyday life, provide directions or instructions independent of written texts. Thus, they are especially useful in culturally diverse, multilingual locations. They are also elemental to attempts to communicate with those with limited literacy or numeracy skills or with a limited grasp of a particular written language. Prominent examples of such pictographic symbol sets are those used at the Olympic games or the Makaton language programme for people with communication and learning difficulties that teaches communication, language and literacy skills using signs and symbols. An icon is an image, picture or representation, especially a likeness that stands for an object or subject by directly representing or signifying it or by analogy. The ISA is also an icon, displaying an analogy between a figure and real life objects (Leach, 1976). Logo(type)s are particular types of graphics based on the name or symbol of products or services to distinguish them and to facilitate identification, thus helping to increase certainty and avoid confusion in the marketplace. The ISA is thus simultaneously a pictogram and icon. While not a logotype, many organizations use the ISA in their logos to communicate both accessibility and disability.

As a material figurative display that produces a metaphoric connection between two spheres the ISA is a symbol. Simultaneously, it is a sign, a metonymic relation situated within a system of content (Barthes, 1972). The sign's form can be modified to a certain extent (the actual depiction of an access symbol, as we show below, changes across time and space), but the meaning within the system remains intact

(the need to mark disability and/or designate accessibility in particular locales). This distinction is important when trying to analyse the ISA as a cultural sign, if we are to specify what indeed the ISA signifies and why this particular signifier was chosen to denote these particular meanings.

Its usefulness depends on the ability of its viewers to recognize in the icon a wheelchair and a human figure and thus to infer that this is a symbol related simultaneously to disability and its ameliorating factor, accessibility (a problem we return to below). Thus, this symbol is of interest in the debate on the difference between 'real space' and 'metaphorical space'. While it is a metaphorical signifier, it is used to designate specific material spaces made accessible to disabled people. In this sense it can be referred to as a material metaphor. This symbol allows signification of an abstraction like 'accessibility' that has very real consequences for democratic goals such as participatory rights. Through it we can see an attempt to signify the invisible, the opportunity to assign a metaphor for a symbolic body of difference or to signify different bodies. Recognizing the complex meanings of the ISA we now sketch the institutionalization of the symbol.

The origin and history of the International Symbol of Access

By the late 1960s building (re)constructions that eliminated barriers were beginning to be noted with a variety of symbols and signs. Sensing the communicative ineffectiveness of many differing symbols, the president of Rehabilitation International (RI), Norman Acton, asked the organization's standing commission, the International Committee on Technical Aids (ICTA)² to establish an international symbol to designate facilities made accessible to people using wheelchairs that could be used in signage consistently throughout the world. With the assistance of the United Nations and the International Standards Organization (ISO), RI began to gather consensus on a universally applicable symbol and agree on standards for its display. Karl Montan of Sweden, chair of ICTA, agreed to lead the search for a valid symbol that would be identifiable from a reasonable distance, self-descriptive, simple and aesthetic, practical and have no secondary meanings (Groce, 2002, p. 52). The aim was to replace many local designs that had begun to proliferate with an authorized international standard that would also be recognizable to international travellers. The ICTA collected several symbols in use and called for other designers to submit additional proposals, with Montan instructing the Scandinavian Design Students' Organization to submit a design. The final group of contenders comprised six symbols: one used at the world Expo '67 in Montreal, Canada; a symbol utilized by New York state, USA; one produced by the Canadian Committee of Building Standards; a symbol submitted by the Pennsylvania-based organization Open Doors for the Handicapped; a design by a group at Norwich School of Art, UK; the symbol designed by Danish design student Susanne Koefoed (Goldsmith, 1976, pp. 55–57; Groce, 2002, p. 52). All symbols were graphic representations of wheelchairs or wheelchair users, indicating that access for this group guided the conceptualization process.



Figure 1. Winning access symbol design by Susanne Koefoed, 1968 (white outline of a wheelchair within a black square (Arthur & Passini, 1992))

The submitted designs were reviewed by a nine person jury of representatives from various international organizations in the fields of architecture, design and disability advocacy: Swedish typographer Bo Berndal; William O. Cooper of the World Veterans Foundation; Manfred Finke, representing the *Fédération Internationale des Personnes Handicapées Physiques* (FIMITIC); Educational Rehabilitation professor Aleksander Hulek of Poland; British cartoonist Peter Kneebone, representing the International Council of Graphic Designers Associations (ICOGRADA); the Finn Esko Kosunen of the *Krigsinvalidernas Brödräförbundet*; William P. McCahill, head of the US President's Committee on Employment of the Physically Handicapped; French physician Alain Rossier, representing ICTA itself; Austrian architect Karl Schwanzner for the International Union of Architects. In 1969 a clear majority of the ICTA-convened jury voted for the Scandinavian design (Figure 1) (ICTA, 1969; Goldsmith 1976, p. 57).

This originally selected symbol suggests a wheelchair. During committee discussion, however, an important modification was suggested by Committee Chair Karl Montan and approved. A head was added to the symbol for aesthetic purposes (Figure 2). As Montan noted: 'A slight inconvenience with the symbol is the equally thick lines which may give an impression of a monogram of letters. With a "head" on the symbol this inconvenience would disappear' (ICTA, 1969).

The modified symbol used today displays a person using a wheelchair, not merely an assistive device. The focus is on access provided for persons to ensure their participation, not on the diagnosis and treatment of individual deficits. Adding a head to this icon of accessibility emphasizes the nexus of disability and personhood and the growing significance of participatory rights for disabled people. However, even the revised symbol has been increasingly criticized. Further cross-cultural research is



Figure 2. The International Symbol of Access (ISA). Official design copyrighted by ICTA and regulated by ISO 7001:1990 public information symbols (white outline of a wheelchair user within a blue square)

needed to clarify whether the ISA is primarily perceived as a person with a mobility impairment or rather the general concept of disability and/or accessibility. The differences between these connotations are crucial in evaluating the symbol's significance and usefulness in fulfilling its varied functions.

Functions of the ISA

While modified over time and in diverse spaces and locations, the ISA serves to communicate accessibility in the built environment, and to indicate who may legitimately use particular spaces, such as widened parking spaces near entrances or enlarged restrooms. Pointing out such spaces may be considered its key function. However, recognition, awareness, boundary drawing and even identity formation also result from usage of the ISA, intended or not. The impact of the symbol in these secondary areas may be difficult to measure, but their importance cannot be denied.

From wayfinding to wayshowing

Wayfinding refers to individuals' orientation within the built environment and the architectural, design and signage elements that assist them in choosing their paths to desired destinations. MIT urbanist Kevin Lynch (1960) coined the term in *The image of the city*, in which he discussed people navigating urban areas by creating mental maps of space consisting of paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks. Then Romedi Passini (1984) differentiated the concept, adding signage and other graphic and audible communication, tactile elements and provisions for users with 'special needs'. Most recently, Per Møllerup (2005) has shifted the discussion by distinguishing emphatically between way finding and way showing. In terms of access and the built environment way showing refers to the social process of helping individuals orient themselves in space. The emphasis is on environmental characteristics and using signage to assist people to find their way, and less on the individual's experience of navigation. Analogously, recent shifts in disability theory and policy replace the focus on individuals with attention to disability's social and political aspects. Indeed, the symbol developed within the context of a nascent social-political model of disability which emphasizes not impairments and their treatment but rather environmental and attitudinal factors and social policies as factors leading to disablement (see, for example, Hahn 1985; Oliver, 1990).

The ISA was conceptualized in an era in which advocates, architects and policy-makers had begun to recognize that disablement can be reduced or eliminated without changing the individual. The symbol was designed as a way to standardize signage indicating accessible facilities, but 'the question of finding an internationally accepted symbol is also an aspect of the endeavor of trying to eliminate architectural barriers for the handicapped' (ICTA, 1969). In the battle for increased access the labelling of types of access is a necessary development, but the ultimate goal of universal design (Mace, 1997) is to obviate the necessity for such symbolic devices by reconstructing environments to have the fewest possible barriers. Universal designs consider from the

beginning the needs and abilities of the broadest possible range of (potential) users. Paradoxically, the ISA, chosen to represent this ideal of barrier-reduced architecture was that of an assistive device for people with mobility impairments, with the consequence that the ISA signifies disablement as much as it signifies facilitated access.

Recognition, awareness and boundary drawing

The ISA not only directs individuals to accessible facilities but also raises consciousness around accessibility and establishes boundaries between those who are 'legitimately disabled', and thus eligible for services and accommodations, and those who are not. Awareness-raising effects are crucial for any minority groups that assert their rights and specify their claims. Some may argue that the awareness raised is done with a negatively connoted tool, namely an individual's needing specific adaptations to access particular spaces. Yet the existence of the ISA simultaneously testifies to attempts to facilitate disabled individuals' full participation in society. However, at the same time this symbol often directs persons needing accommodations to 'special', often segregated, locations. If universal design principles had been carried out fully we would have no need for such a symbol, because places and objects would have been designed from the start for a diverse population. Yet current urban planning is inscribed by a 'design apartheid' where urban planners, architects and related officials are guilty of constructing spaces that exclude disabled people and prioritize the dominant values of the temporarily able-bodied community (Imrie, 1996).

At the same time we must also address the environments given at present, acknowledge desirable changes completed and suggest how access policies and practices can be achieved. Indeed, awareness-raising is positive in that sensitivity to issues of accessibility is crucial for all individuals as they age and will most likely be confronted with their own disablement in the future (Zola, 1982, p. 242). This life course argument can be complemented by positions that put a positive value on human variation and (bio)diversity and call for inclusive environments and societies.

Perhaps more than any other aspect, boundary drawing incites controversy and battles over who belongs and whether the symbol is an adequate representation. Given that the boundaries around the group that benefits from accessibility can never be drawn absolutely and is forever being (re)negotiated, this function of the ISA will always be fraught with conflict, as it gives significant power to those who plan spaces and regulate policies even when these decision-makers have insufficient experience or knowledge about disability and access needs.

Another effect is that by marking who benefits from spaces made accessible people with impairments are simultaneously accommodated and disabled (being labelled, separated or segregated). Not only does the ISA represent disability and designate spaces where it can exist, it also defines the very boundaries of physical otherness. As valuable services or benefits, such as widened parking spaces, are designated for use only by those legitimately classified as having a disability there will be increasing pressure to extend the boundaries of the group, but only if the benefits outweigh the stigma associated with membership (cf. Stone, 1984, on the distributive dilemma).

Following Michel Foucault (1990), one may argue that identities are constructed through disciplinary practices establishing the binary of physical ‘ab/normality’. The physically ideal person belongs to a minority at best and is a theoretical abstraction at worst. Like other representations of disability, the ISA is part of an attempt to create concrete and clear boundaries between ‘non-disabled’ and ‘disabled’ persons when this binary belies the relational, context-dependent aspect of disablement. These culturally defined borders in turn strengthen the myth of physical ‘normality’, so dominant in contemporary societies in the developed world. The reverse of this phenomenon brings us to another consequence of utilization of the ISA: activists and identities that challenge that socially constructed dichotomy ‘ab/normal’.

Activism and identity formation

A positive aspect of the ISA that must not be neglected is the possibility of identification with peers resulting from having a common symbol and territory. The ISA became ubiquitous not just as a symbol of access, but of disability itself (we will critique this conflation next). While the ISA may not be as abstract or as universal as the rainbow flag that the LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning) movement has successfully institutionalized over the past few decades, the ISA is still considerably more widespread. It is also officially regulated, whereas the flag is not. The rainbow flag joins other symbols, such as the pink triangle, that more clearly relate to oppression faced by that group in the past. An audacious strategy by ACT UP turned the pink triangle, a symbol with negative connotations from Nazi Germany, upside down, using it to serve as a rallying cry to fight the AIDS crisis and oppression. The ADAPT disability activist group’s logotype, transforming the ISA by having the figure break chains over its head (Figure 3), exhibits a similar tactic: the ISA becomes a show of pride and power.

Importantly, many disability groups have already adapted the ISA for their own purposes to help them reach their goals, such as the disability activist organization Not Dead Yet (Figure 4). These symbols’ description as ‘pride’ symbols, in contrast to the original ISA, emphasizes the close relationship of the ISA with anti-discrimination legislation and disability activism. Both sets of symbols render marginalized communities recognizable, as they assert positive feelings to replace the negative experiences of oppression and discrimination.



Figure 3. Logotype of ADAPT, American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today (ISA with an animation showing a wheelchair user breaking chains overhead)



Figure 4. Logotype of NOT DEAD YET (Name integrating the ISA, wheelchair user becomes the O in NOT)

Such logotypes emphasize that graphical representations reduced to the essential pictorial outlines of the wheelchair (user), as the ISA depicts, are not only popular, but have also been modified for diverse purposes. Thus, debate and dialogue about access symbols reflects, and should refer to, the politics of disability representation, especially given the lack of democratically organized decision-making about such a key symbol of and for disabled people.

Diverse modification of the symbol will continue and as it does the meaning of the symbol may become even less about physical access per se and more about disability generally. Alternatively, as more access symbols are developed and older models are renewed with shifting paradigms, technological advances and universally designed environments, the need for such signage may recede. While it attempts to reduce disadvantages the ISA may also be (ab)used to reinforce ableist beliefs about individual performances in particular situations. Until universal design (and the universalizing social policies likely to be needed to support it) succeeds in reducing the barriers in environments and maximizing the usefulness of products and services during the design stage identity formation processes are among the most positive aspects of the ISA.

Critiquing the ISA

While there are many different levels upon which to critique any representation, the diversity of the fluid, permeable group of persons who need to find an accessible facility or entrance contributes to the difficulty of matching the expectations and perspectives of persons with the symbol's function as an information guide to the built environment. While for some the ISA is a positively connoted status symbol that allows them to park near the entrance of their destinations of choice, for others it is negatively imbued with the taint of stigma in disabling societies, as they utilize these 'specially' allocated spaces. Here we briefly review some criticisms lodged against the contemporary design and application of the ISA.

Totality

The strength of the access symbol comes from the totality of the image and its diffusion throughout the world. As the activating document stated, ‘this symbol with a head should be recommended for use throughout the world to indicate accessibility to various facilities for the handicapped’ (ICTA, 1969). As the document specifies no specific ‘handicap’ we argue that the image of a wheelchair user was used because it was and is the prototypic representation of disability in Western societies.

Symbolically the ISA represents a specific disability (a person with a mobility impairment that uses a wheelchair), but it is also simultaneously a metaphor for many other forms of disability. As its name suggests the ISA represents access for disabled people, not just wheelchair users (increasingly other disability access symbols have been designed).³ Is the equation of disability or even ‘mobility impairment’ with ‘wheelchair user’ justified? Jenny Morris has criticized the idea that ‘the typical disabled person is a young man in a wheelchair who is fit, never ill, and whose only need is a physically accessible environment’ (Morris, 2001, p. 9). In fact, the demographics of disability tell quite another story, including chronic illness, cognitive differences and older persons. Thus, the choice of a wheelchair as a symbol representing access for all disabled individuals or even all people with mobility impairments is disputed. This ambiguity can be seen most clearly in disagreements over parking spaces marked with the access symbol. Since the referent in the symbol is a wheelchair user, many people assume that accessible spaces are solely for wheelchair users, when in fact they benefit and can be legitimately used by people with various impairments (some invisible, such as asthma, heart or joint problems and so on), who are often reprimanded for using them. On the other hand, which individuals should have priority when there are limited spaces available?

Today the ISA has extended beyond the boundaries of its original purpose ‘to identify, mark or show the way to buildings and facilities that are accessible to and usable by all persons whose mobility is restricted, including wheelchair users’ (RI, 1978). From its inception there were concerns that the ISA would be misused for more ‘general purposes’ (RI, 1978). Indeed, a virtual pioneer such as Google uses the ISA to indicate online communication accessibility that has little or no relationship to physical space or mobility. The ISA appears on signs and web sites of innumerable organizations that cater to diverse populations and disability groups that have only a tenuous relationship to mobility issues. Thus the ISA is often used to symbolize disability generally, as opposed to physical accessibility. The next section critiques the flipside of this totality, exclusivity.

Exclusivity

Critics charge that the ISA is too narrow; that it fails to capture the breadth of users and situations in which it is used. Whether this is a latent or desired function of the symbol is indeed a task all proposed alternatives will struggle with, but the exclusivity issue also refers to accessibility being seen as accruing benefits only to wheelchair

users, when in fact such modifications as ramps and curb cuts benefit many. Indeed, by considering access needs in the design phase universally designed buildings are able to meet the traditional standards for public spaces and provide greatly enhanced accessibility for individuals with impairments while incurring modest, if any, increases in overall cost (cf. Preiser & Ostroff, 2001, on universal design guidelines and international cases). For example, curb cuts—little slopes built into sidewalks at intersections and crossings—make it possible for wheelchair users to navigate far more easily, but these ubiquitous innovations are not marked by the ISA. The impact of the curb cut has extended beyond wheelchair users and many people with no perceptible impairment prefer and utilize them, including parents with buggies, cyclists and delivery persons pushing hand trucks. This inexpensive accommodation, initially designed for a relatively small segment of the population, benefits many. When people understand that the ISA refers to a changed built environment they would be able to use the symbol in their own way finding when they need a ramp, an elevator, a wide door or any of the dozens of other adaptations that are generally preferable for most users. Total or exclusive, the symbol is also critiqued on the grounds that it is inaccurate.

Inaccuracy

The design of the ISA, which is static and flat, may be technically correct, but impersonal, and even inaccurate. As described above, the original design was of a wheelchair, not of a person using one. The addition of a head surely leads to many viewers interpreting the ISA with personification. Yet the symbol produces ambiguity over the centrality of ‘disability’ or ‘person’. Although the figure in the symbol refers to a human being, the contour represents mostly the wheelchair, which reinforces a common cultural misconception that people with mobility impairments are ‘confined’ or ‘bound’ to their wheelchairs. In line with what happens on a daily basis in social interactions, disability becomes an all-encompassing feature stigmatizing and dehumanizing the person bearing it (Garland-Thomson, 1997).

While many disabled people may argue that disability is not even a key factor in their everyday lives, research has found that non-disabled people may have different views. A disability is often generalized to all aspects of the person. In order to increase equality for disabled people there is a move to emphasize personhood and humanity over impairment. Yet the ISA in its current design emphasizes the latter. The conflation of the wheelchair and the user’s body in the symbol turns the depicted person into a cyborg at best, and a non-person at worst. While Donna Haraway (1991) viewed the unification of machine and human as one that holds radical and liberatory possibilities, not all agree. As Joe Clark (2002) commented on the ISA: ‘It’s pretty awful even as a symbol of specific wheelchair access due to its ugliness and its strange Borg-like union of Tadpoleman and machine’. The issue of technology is crucial here, and the interaction between wheelchair technology and access over the 20th century has begun to be traced (Watson & Woods, 2005): enhanced wheelchairs have increased individuals’ access to the built environment, leading to a demand for



Figure 5. Self-propelling wheelchair user ISA by VSA Arts, 2005

greater access and better mobility aids, and so on. Similarly, in the case of ISA the reduction of barriers and the signage that represents such progress (albeit limited, even in the wealthiest countries) becomes just one more phase in the battle to reduce the environmental and social barriers that disable people.

Ironically for a mobility symbol, the body of the user—in the contour of the chair—is not in motion, but rather stationary. This is in contrast to other figures in traffic signs in which the figure is represented as moving. This immobility is striking in a symbol that should signify access for people with impairments to public spaces, which assumes mobility to reach and navigate such spaces. Recent iterations have responded to this charge by showing the symbol's protagonist as self-propelling forward, with her or his arms stretched out to get the wheels spinning (Figure 5).

This symbol emphasizes mobility and independence, as well as representing the person with a more active body, increasing the personability and mobility represented.

Complex signifier

As with other symbols, the ISA has a wide range of potential signifiers. Regarding the ISA, the wheelchair (or a white cane, etc.) makes the corporeal difference more visible and becomes an external marker of disability itself (Deshen, 1992). In everyday life the aids themselves become the subject of prejudice, as the disability itself may be hardly perceivable. Nancy Mairs (1996, p. 88) wrote about her own experience: 'the brace makes my MS concrete and forces me to wear it on the outside'. Thus, assistive devices may make an impairment or chronic illness visible. However, paradoxically, Mairs explained that wheelchairs can also make their users invisible: 'Hey! I want to shout to the lofty world. Down here! There's a person down here! But I'm not, by their standards, quite a person anymore' (Mairs, 1996, p. 89).

For many people with impairments a wheelchair, cane or brace represents an increased ability rather than a decreased one. It is not solely a source of stigma or a visual marker of difference, but a force of liberation and independence. The wheelchair allows greater mobility, more independence and freedom. As Diana Courvant explained:

Disabled people are not confined to wheelchairs; they are liberated by them. ... Yet none of these things are possible without the presence of visible symbols of disability, symbols that evoke strong feelings from everyone around the symbol carrier. It was only through a willingness to be identified as disabled that I gained access to the tools of my self-care. (Courvant, 1999, p. 105)



Figure 6. Modified ISA (integrated into abstraction of an elevator with arrows), Museum of Technology, Berlin, Germany, 2005

A prominent ableist assumption is that you are not ‘really’ disabled unless the disability is visible, especially through an assistive device. However, many people who have a mobility impairment do not use wheelchairs. The misconception is strengthened by a symbol of access showing a wheelchair. It creates a common problem for disabled people who do not use a chair and who are policed when they park in accessible parking marked by the ISA to ensure that they are indeed ‘sufficiently’ disabled to claim the benefit.

Beyond the claim aspects, a second common confusion regarding the denotation of the wheelchair is more functional. If the ISA represents purposefully organized accessibility, why does the symbol not include a ramp or some other element that would suggest reduced physical barriers? In the case of elevators a relatively simple change has increased the fit. In this symbol (Figure 6) a wheelchair user is represented being transported in an elevator (up and down arrows symbolize vertical movement).

However, as is clear in this example, were the symbol less abstract the need for a plethora of slightly modified symbols, each usable in only few cases, would make signage more complex, against the goal of keeping things simple so as to communicate quickly and across a range of places. In sum, there are considerable benefits to having one standard, such as widespread recognition, ease of understanding and cross-cultural validity, however, there are unresolved issues.

Universality

As the name suggests, the International Symbol of Access enjoys an assumed universality. The symbol itself is seen on facilities and road signs in many countries, with little variation, to indicate accessible spaces or services. This unifying function is reflected in the activating document where the symbol’s rationale was specified:

Fast trains and aeroplanes have made it possible for disabled persons all over the world to travel. ... They will come to places they do not know and consequently they do not know which entrances to buildings, toilets, shops, etc., they could use. Therefore the need for an international symbol indicating accessibility to such facilities is obvious. (ICTA, 1969)

Yet, the ISA signifying ‘barrier-free’ environments might not be appropriate or positively valued everywhere. In many Asian and Middle Eastern cultures ‘independence’

and 'care' are not construed as rigidly as in most Western cultures, with interdependence in families or communities common, even being encouraged (Komardjaja, 2001). Because wheelchairs are not a universally used device nor do they look identical globally their reification in the ISA limits the symbol's cross-cultural understanding. It is clear from cultural accounts that this symbol might work well as an international symbol for Western tourists, but may not as an indigenously correct and apt symbol of access for people with mobility impairments everywhere. While tourism revenues, international standards and legal necessity are major impulses to create more accessible environments worldwide, the demands and customs of local populations may not be served well, or at all, by the ISA.

Alternatives to the ISA

Due to such critiques and others ICTA Global established a Working Group on accessible signage to review the ICTA ISA at its London meeting in 1999. The members also considered opportunities for an international symbol for people with ambulatory impairments (Figure 7), as well as the development of a hierarchy of symbols based on the pre-eminence of the ISA.

However, is there a need for more diverse access signs that are impairment-specific or identity-specific? A similar shift can be seen within the disability movement itself, which, according to Lennard Davis (2002), is moving away from a unified theory (social model of disability) into a phase in which in-group differences and diverse perspectives and experiences are sought. Or, conversely, is there a need for a different, more unifying symbol of disablement processes that emphasizes commonality among all disabled people? Some proposals for a revised access symbol seem to head in that direction.

Dan Wilkens (2004) humorously suggested elimination of:

the wheelchair symbol, keep the same blue field and throw a big bold capital 'A' in the middle. Keep it white for continuity. Why an 'A'? A for Accessible. A for Accommodating. A for All. ... The 'A' doesn't just focus on architectural access but on attitudinal access.

Wilkens' suggested symbol focuses more on the people designing public spaces in an able-bodied image and not on the people wrongly excluded from these environments. On centre stage are disabling environments that cause inaccessibility, not individuals



Figure 7. Proposed international symbol of mobility (ISM) by Access International (hand gripping a rail for stability and guidance, on a blue background)



Figure 8. 'A' access symbol by Daniel Wilkens of Nth Degree (Roman capital letter A in Helvetica bold white type)

and impairments. Yet, problems with this proposition include the confusion or even real physical danger of using letters that have different or even contrary meanings in different languages. Therefore, Wilkins' suggestion should be seen as a discursive alternative more than an actual sign that could reliably function internationally (Figure 8).

Another contender is a universal access icon designed for Apple's X operating system (Figure 9) that places the individual front and centre. However, it shares with the current ISA an immobile figure of anatomically indeterminate sex, and with an exaggerated head (presumably to suggest information processing). A third alternative is a series by the Modernization of the Universal Disability Symbol (MUDS) Task Force, a grass-roots effort to challenge and change the ISA. These versions integrate the ISA into various representations of globes (MUDS, 2002) to reach their goal of a more inclusive symbol. Yet, there is no consensus on how to best do so and who should be enabled to make such far-reaching decisions, and none of these symbols has been subjected to a democratic decision-making process among members of the disability community.

Other substitutes include myriad textual additions to the ISA. In everyday language the symbol is often supplemented by the words 'handicapped parking' instead of 'accessible parking'. Besides the fact that this is linguistically incorrect, it appears that the symbolic representation inserts impairment into parlance relating to anything that encounters it (e.g. an accessible bathroom to be used by disabled people becomes a 'disabled toilet'). This language use emphasizes discourses of impairment and affliction and not of civil rights, participation and equality. If at all, such additions should emphasize or specify the accommodation or service (e.g. 'ramped entrance'), which



Figure 9. 'Universal access' symbol for Apple Computer's X operating system (human figure standing with arms and legs outstretched surrounded by white and blue circles)

would be of use not only to individuals who use wheelchairs but also the many others—people pushing baby carriages, those carrying luggage—who benefit from accessible entrances and other accommodations.

Discussion: the steep ramp of change

In this article, we have pointed out a paradox embedded in the ISA (that will be a challenge for all other contenders as well): to label accessible environments by representing assistive technology which ameliorates disablement. Indeed, reduced barriers indicated by the ISA may in fact make an impairment inconsequential, as participation is facilitated. Nevertheless, authorized legal claims to use some ISA-designated spaces, such as accessible parking, often require official recognition and classification as a ‘disabled person’.

In the battle over representation the institutional first mover advantage accrues to the traditional ISA. After all, it is everywhere already and has been more or less passively accepted and seen by hundreds of millions of people. Any challenger would require an extraordinary amount of effort, time and money to dislodge the current ISA. However, as the above mentioned examples demonstrate, creative changes have continuously been made to the original iteration of the idea. Incremental alterations have occurred in a variety of cultural contexts to match local perspectives and preferences, and this process will continue.

The current ISA references many kinds of physical and existential experiences seen as ‘other’ in one concentrated image. It is indeed this simplicity and perceived unity that give this symbol much power. This symbol subsumes diverse disabilities in a pictogram of a wheelchair user while simultaneously reinforcing a dichotomy of disability that separates those who are deemed ‘normal’ (needing no access accommodations) from those who are not. Therefore, we have argued that the ISA represents disability as much as it shows the way to an accessible door through which to enter.

The ISA simultaneously facilitates the participation of some social groups as it restricts others. While following every act of inclusion there is one of exclusion, the most total exclusion results from limited awareness and from a complete lack of representation. Therefore, advocates of alternative symbols to the ISA—which has become the most well-known representation of ‘disability’ worldwide—must acknowledge the historically evolved utility and current benefit of the ISA as it functions today, even as they attempt, against the steep ramp of change, to make it more inclusive.

Acknowledgements

This research was first presented at the Society for Disability Studies annual conference in 2004 and we thank the participants for their interest and suggestions. For sharing their knowledge of the design and selection process leading to the ISA, we thank Barbara Duncan of Disability World and Tomas Lagerwall of Rehabilitation International. And we gratefully acknowledge the insightful comments of Robert Bogdan and the anonymous reviewers.

Notes

1. Due to space limitations we here present only a selection of modified or replacement symbols. We welcome submissions to an international exhibition we are preparing to show the diffusion and diversity of the ISA and to facilitate ongoing discussions in the global disability community about modifications and alternatives (lbenmosh@maxwell.syr.edu; AccessSymbol@gmail.com).
2. ICTA, like its parent organization, has changed its name with shifting disability paradigms, from 'technical aids' to 'technology and accessibility' (cf. Groce, 2002).
3. The Graphic Artists Guild (USA) makes digital versions of some prevalent access symbols available at www.gag.org/resources/das.php.

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