

Reframing Accessibility: Reflections on David Gissen's "Architecture of Disability"

“ Gissen expresses the importance of going beyond accessibility studies; we need to make architectural decisions from the perspective of impaired people. We don't need to make better buildings, rather, we need to reinvent ourselves in the aim of making better architects.”

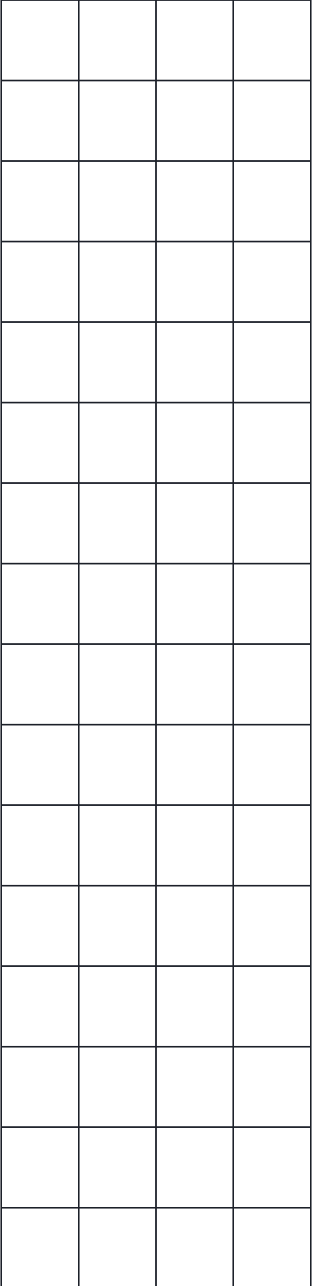
by Evelynn Harra



Photo courtesy of Keith Krumwiede

VOL.8





A low chatter filled the air in the brightly lit auditorium. Everyone was excited to be present for our guest speaker, designer David Gissen. Gissen is a former professor who worked at CCA for over 10 years as a tenured professor in the Architecture department. As a result, the space was buzzing with students, faculty, staff, colleagues, and friends, infusing the environment with an inviting energy and keeping the audience in rapt attention.

Gissen is now based in New York City, where he is currently a Professor of Architecture and Urban History at Parsons School of Design at The New School. In combination with his teaching and academic career, he writes as part of his practice, having previ-

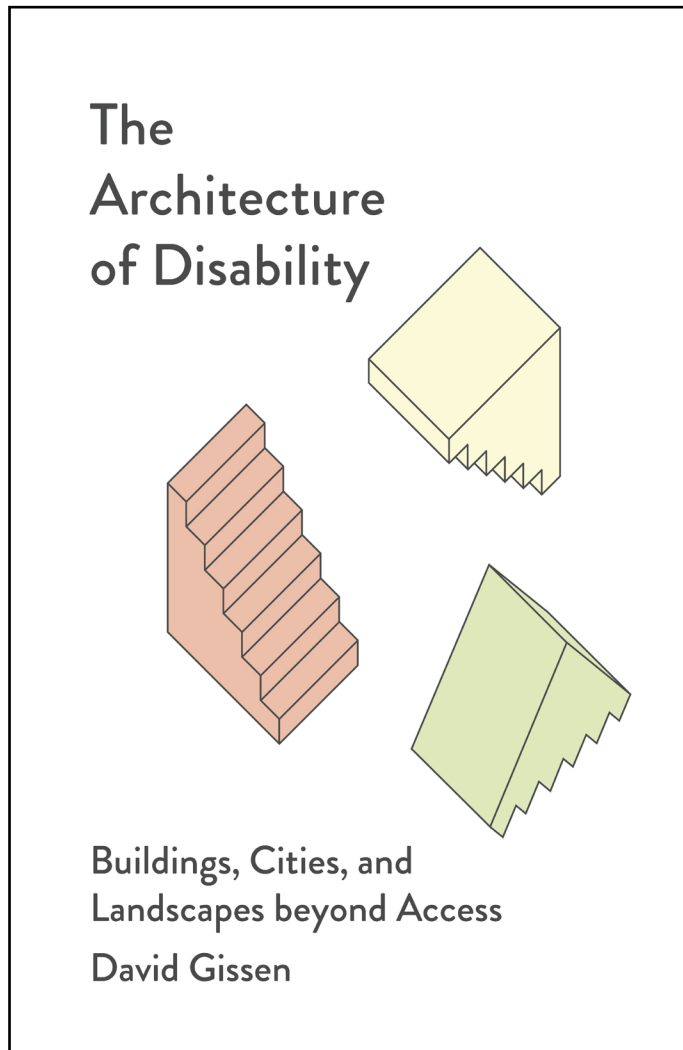


Photo courtesy of David Gissen

ously authored *Subnature: Architecture's Other Environments* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2009) and *Manhattan Atmospheres: Architecture, the Interior Environment, and Urban Crisis* (University of Minnesota Press, 2014).

Gissen's presentation at CCA, *The Architecture of Disability*, took place on February 22, 2024 and was based off of his most recent book, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities and Landscapes Beyond Access* (University of Minnesota Press, 2023). In this research he anchors architecture in the personal experience of disability or impairment, as a baseline perspective for building our environments. His personal experience as an amputee and his extensive academic career within architecture and accessibility studies are factors that inform his writing and research.



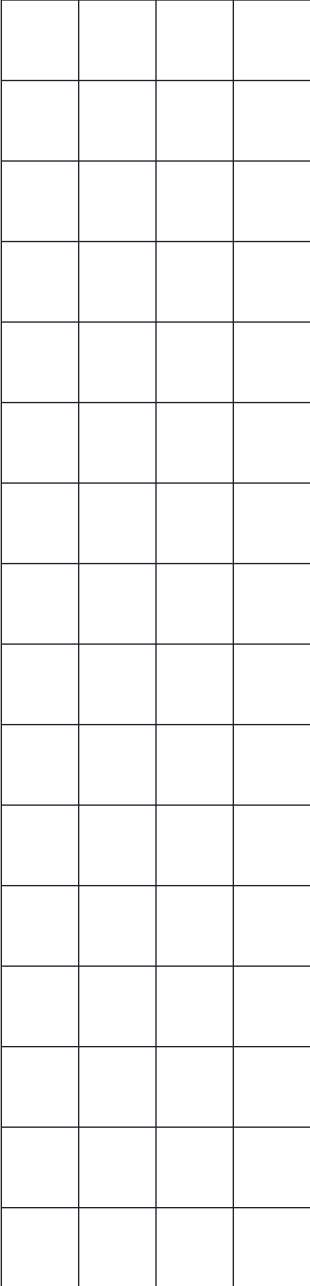
Photo courtesy of David Gissen

During his presentation, Gissen stated two things: one, architecture needs to be functional and two, the definition of 'function' is biased. Grounded by these assertions he professes his views against functionalist architecture and functionalist biases. This contradiction of architecture being functional, and function being a social measurement of mobility, is a source of both frustration and inspiration in Gissen's work. He shared photographs of Park McArthur's work *Ramps* (2014) – a collection of found ramps displayed in a gallery, divorced from their intended sites – as an example demonstrating how disability can be viewed from the perspective of the impaired to inform decisions of space and architecture. Accommodation, in this case ramps, is as much about our attitudes toward disability as it is about the actual physical construction. Within his writings Gissen expresses his feelings that clinical views of accessibility and function come out of a lab study, framed by biomechanical procedures, rather than personal experience.

Gissen remarked that disability is usually presented as a negative, or something to be fixed or improved upon; when in fact, there should be a different approach. From this shift in perspective a jaw dropping discussion arose over the distinction



Photo courtesy of Keith Krumwiede

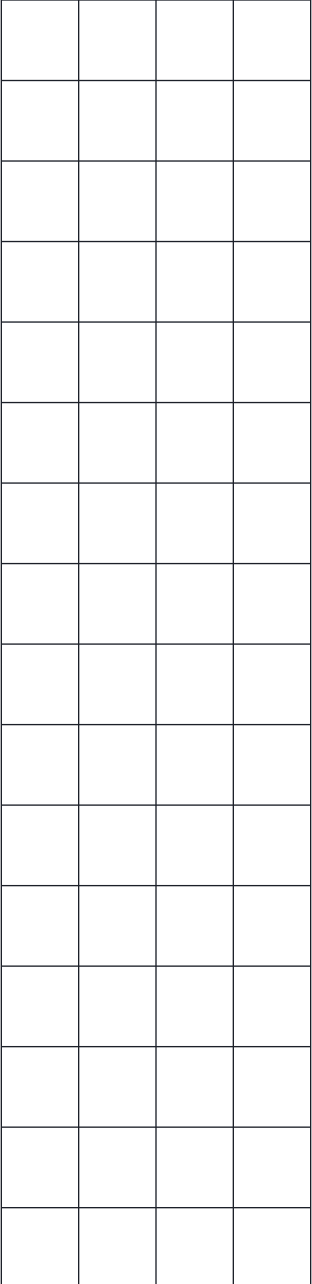


between access and ability. Access is more related to environment and social constructs, whereas ability includes personal body patterns and range of mobility. Through his writings and teachings, Gissen wants to go beyond the parameters of accessibility studies within the field of architecture.

Gissen made a simple, tangible connection by relaying the frustration and absurdity of inaccessible architecture. He said, "I'm going to say three sentences that are not acceptable and strange. Then, I'm gonna say a sentence that we say all the time. Listen, and let me know what you think: 'I want to make this building accessible for Black people. I want to make this building accessible for women. I want to make this building accessible for Jewish people.' These sentences are wrong and hurtful. Although, 'I want to make this building accessible for disabled people' is a phrase used in architecture and construction." Hearing him say this really made me stop. I put down my pen after frantically paraphrasing Gissen's words.

Sometimes it takes stating the obvious to make the nuanced make sense. It really made me stop and reframe my thoughts about minority groups and how we physically construct the spaces in our lives. I took the bus to get to this presentation, something that I didn't think twice about. The building that the presentation was held in was a two story building – the city of San Francisco is blanketed with multi-story buildings. This entire city, my whole life, is built around constructs of ableism that I am unaware of, that are present in mental attitudes, and that are mirrored in the vertical topography of the city. Listening to Gissen, I am pushed to think differently.

That was Gissen's entire point and objective. Not all bodies function the same. There is nothing to fix; only acceptance. Gissen's presentation echoed the theme that the body's measurable function is a construct. This construct of measurable function is a mindset that is then built into our society through architecture. Therefore, architecture isn't inherently ableist, people are. Gissen expresses the importance of going beyond accessibility studies; we need to make architectural decisions from the perspective of impaired people. We don't need to make better buildings, rather, we need to reinvent ourselves in the aim of making better architects.



Evelynn Harra (MA Visual & Critical Studies 2024) has an interest in the visual culture of perception. Her research values the multiplicity of personal experience to deeper understand the visual art within our culture.