**Toilet Signs as Border Markers: Exploring Disabled People's Access to Space**

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**Plain English Summary**

**1. Introduction**

We think about how toilet signs affect whether disabled people can access toilets away from home. In the UK, most toilets available are in commercial settings (e.g. shops, cafes and pubs) and they are often expected to make money for a business. This can cause problems for disabled people, who sometimes need specific toilet facilities or equipment which can be an additional cost. Sometimes, a business looking like it’s inclusive helps them make money. But, although toilet signs may indicate that toilets are available for disabled people, many toilets are not actually suitable. Without access to toilets, other spaces become unavailable (e.g. for work, community or leisure).

**2. Summary of the research**

Our research is known as the ‘Around the Toilet’ project. We talked to disabled, queer and trans people (and others) about what makes a safe and accessible toilet. We did this in a variety of ways, including through interviews, making films, performance workshops and using social media. In the paper, we think about what people said using ideas from ‘disability justice’ and ‘collective access’. This means, we think about how disability, as well as race, sexuality, gender etc might have an impact on people’s toilet access. We also consider how toilet access relates to capitalism and the desire to make money.

**3. Summary of the main findings**

We found that toilets with the International Symbol of Access (or ‘blue wheelchair sign’) are often still not accessible for many disabled people. This may be because they are broken, used as a storage room, or not big enough. It may also be because some disabled people require a hoist and changing bench to use the toilet and these are not usually provided. There are also lots of other reasons that these toilets are not suitable.

We also found that other toilet users or passers-by sometimes don’t believe that people are disabled (if they decide they don’t ‘look disabled’). Sometimes they try to stop them using the accessible toilet. This may be made worse by the fact that a wheelchair is used to represent all disabled people, but many disabled people do not use wheelchairs.

In both of the situations above, although the International Symbol of Access sign on the door tells disabled people that there is a toilet suitable for them, often it’s not.

We also think about how toilet signs have been changed to try and make them better. We looked at signs that are now often used in the UK, which say: ‘not every disability is visible’. These signs are made by the charity Crohns and Colitis UK and they try to stop people judging who can and cannot use the accessible toilet. However, we show that although these signs might improve toilet access for some people, they don’t work for everyone. Sometimes they are used in a way which still requires people wanting to use the toilet to ask for a key. This is unhelpful if you find it difficult to travel long distances, as it will require more energy to collect the key and return to the toilet. It also means that whoever has the key still has to believe that you are a disabled person and deserve to use that toilet. Some people are more likely to be believed than others - for example, if you are white, middle-class and conform to expected gender presentations. Businesses are also encouraged to use the signs because Crohns and Colitis UK tell them that they will make more money if they do. We do not think that making money should be the motivation for creating toilets that everyone can use. We show that using money as the reason to provide inclusive spaces means that some people will always be excluded, because sometimes, creating accessible environments will cost money, but it is still important.

Overall, we show that toilet signs can give people false information about whether they will be able to use a toilet, that they sometimes encourage others to decide who is able to use that toilet and that they can be used by businesses to look ‘inclusive’, even when they are not.

**4. Summary of the main implications of the research**

We argue that toilets suitable for everyone are unlikely to be provided while making money is one of the motivations. We therefore ask people involved in disability activism or toilet activism to challenge profit-based arguments for creating accessible toilets and other accessible spaces.

We also ask those people to consider other people’s toilet access alongside that of disabled people (such as trans and queer people, homeless people, people of colour etc) and to think about overlaps across identities and oppressions. We would like to see different groups of people who are trying to fight for better toilets joining up, talking to and working with each other.

We suggest that there needs to be more research which thinks about toilet access in relation to capitalism, as currently there isn’t very much.

**5. More information**

For more on the Around the Toilet, including access to our other publications and a number of resources including films and toolkits for planners and designers, see <http://aroundthetoilet.com>.

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