

1. Opinions



Mobility and disability

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Javier Caletrio

The daily experiences of mobility for the majority of disabled people still remain overlooked. What does it mean to move around in our cities when physical mobility is reduced? How can society be made more accessible for all?

For most people, it is quite normal to hop on and off buses, to run to catch a train or to bemoan the hours spent in traffic jams on the daily commute. Mobility, it is often argued, now forms a crucial part of who we are and how we live. But in every town and city, all over Europe, there are millions of individuals for whom the daily experience of mobility is very different and those taken-for-granted journeys are impossible or very difficult because they have a disability.¹

This is not an academic paper that references works from either mobility or disabilities studies but it is a piece of writing born out of experience that should serve as a further reminder of the multitude of experiences of mobility. I am not disabled but my wife is. Over the years I have seen the world through her eyes as she struggles on crutches or attempts to navigate the world in a wheelchair. She has shared her thoughts with me for this article, as have friends with disabilities. It must also be noted that there are many disabilities, visible and invisible, and the issues thrown up by each in relation to mobility cannot be covered in the space available here. As such, the main focus is on those with physically restricted mobility and the examples are taken from the UK where we reside.

We have all experienced the frustration of rushing to work only to find that an escalator or the lift is broken down and we instead have to climb several flights of stairs. While this is a minor inconvenience for an able-bodied person, for someone with restricted mobility it can be nothing short of a disaster, yet it is the sort of disaster that is an everyday reality. The modern city is simply not made for the disabled. Just as it is true that the head is not noticed until a splitting headache strikes, we rarely notice just how inaccessible a space is until we can't access it. There are many examples that have formed part of our personal experience: the presence of just one step can render a whole shop out of bounds. A paucity of accessible toilets can mean that visits to a metropolis have to be planned out in advance to account for this while a lack of disabled parking spots has thwarted many a shopping trip. Cobble streets can be too painful for a wheelchair to traverse and rain, at most an uncomfortable inconvenience for the majority, can render paving slabs treacherous. In addition, disability access laws in the UK can still be trumped by heritage which means that, forced to choose between preserving an otherwise inaccessible, listed building and making changes to facilitate visits by disabled people, the former can still win.²







Image 1. Disabled spaces, provided by the local council, are also often used to house waste skips, thus reducing the availability of accessible parking.

Even public transport, which is often advertised as accessible, can be a minefield. Rush hour trains can be too packed to even consider fitting a wheelchair into. Ramps to get onto a train, even if booked in advance often do not materialise, leading to many documented cases of stranded wheelchair users.³ Buses, which increasingly use hydraulics to provide level access from the pavement, are of little use when, in dense traffic, they stop a metre away from the curb, nor are their wheelchair spaces useful when occupied by children's prams.⁴ Taxis are another option but, in addition to the expense, in many towns and cities there are few that can accommodate mobility equipment, and those that can normally have to be booked in advance. To make matters worse, several taxi firms in the UK have been plastered across the news for charging disabled individuals more on account of their misfortune of needing a larger vehicle to accommodate a wheelchair.⁵ If these problems seem bad, they pale in comparison to the horrors and indignities suffered by wheelchair users on flights, such as being manhandled by crew, being unable to use the bathroom and wheelchairs being either left behind in airports or damaged in transit.⁶







Image 2. Garden centres and shopping malls often attract more disabled visitors due to their better provision of facilities, such as level access and parking.





Images 3. Good access is not always a question of technology. Here, lowered curbs open the city up to many.







Image 4. Necessary roadworks can render a route impassable for those with disabilities.







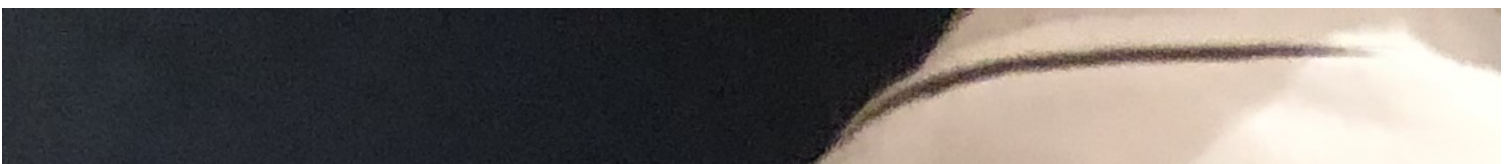
Image 5 Some large cities now provide countdown clocks at pedestrian crossings. The allotted time is a reflection of the urban rhythms envisioned by traffic planners. While useful for showing how much time is left to cross, they also dictate the pace of walking and for a slow walker or wheelchair user it can be a challenge to cross the road in the given time.

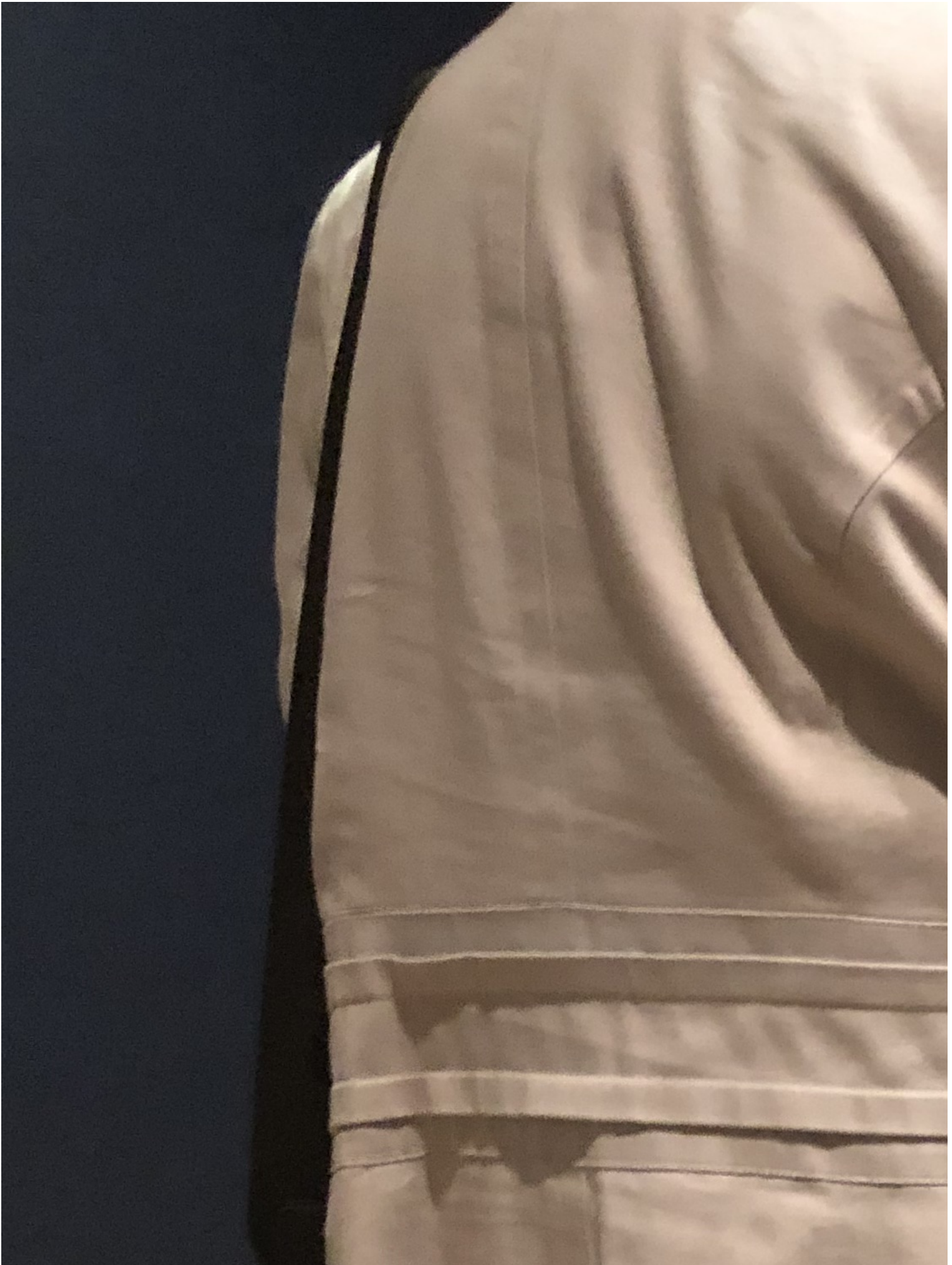


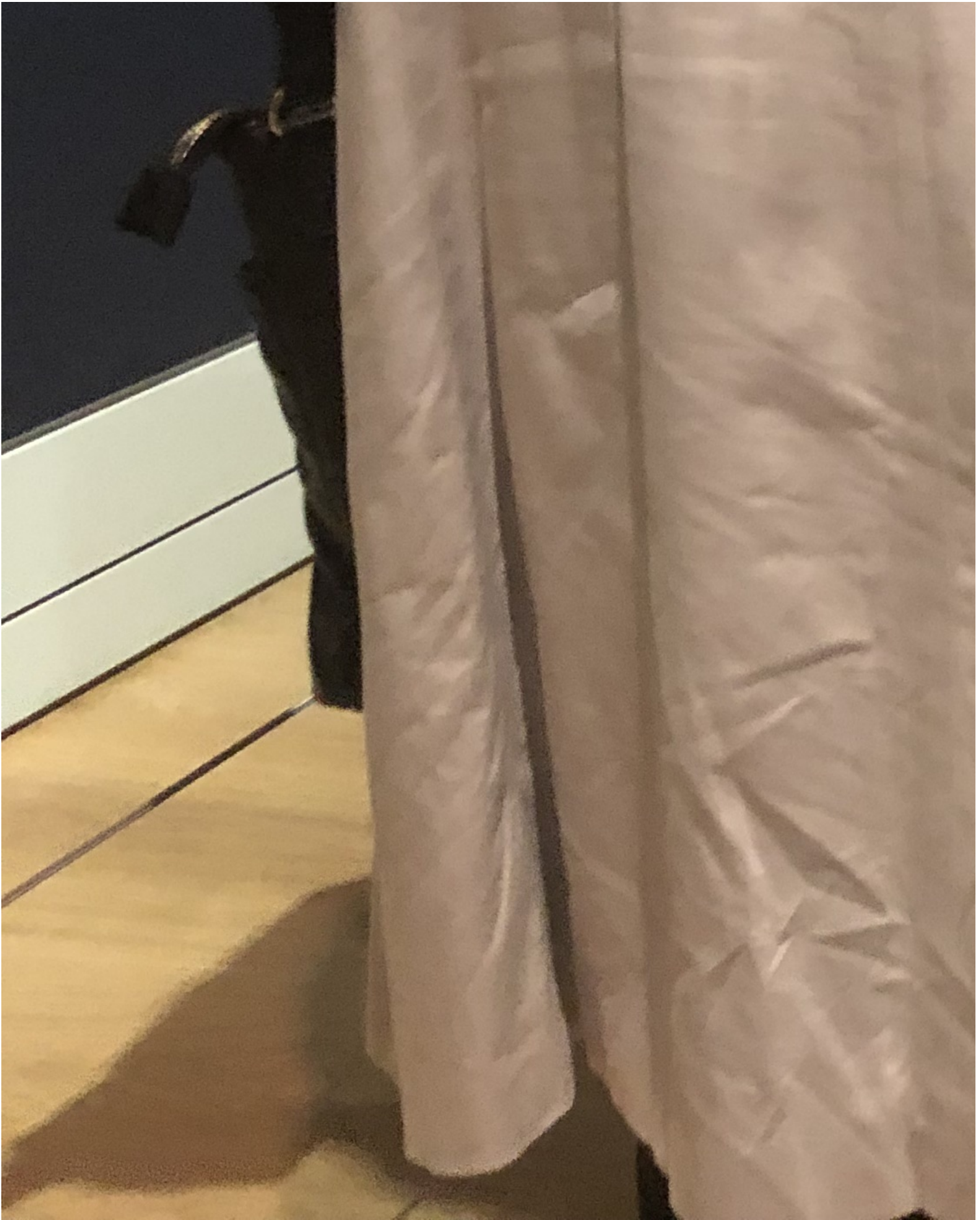


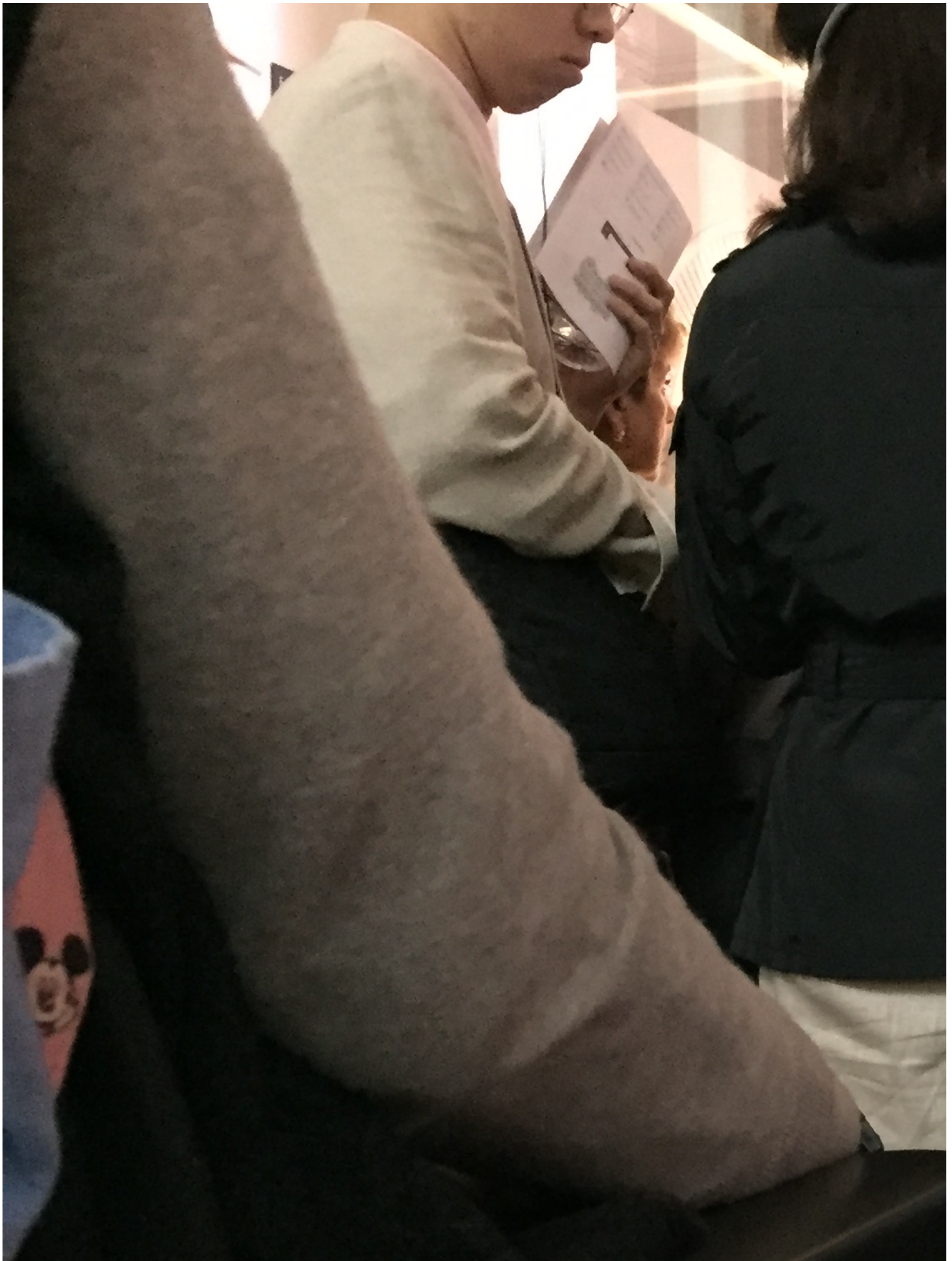
Image 6. There are many types of disabilities and those who are ambulant yet slow and unsteady frequently shun busy city centres in favour of out-of-town shops with their wide aisles which feel safer and less risky.

I have lost count of the number of times that my wife has been left disappointed as a trip out has been spoiled by a problem of access. This is because mobility is not an end but a means. Rarely do we take a bus or train or get into the car for a mere run around but rather to go somewhere. Most people take it for granted that they can easily travel to work, visit friends, go shopping or enjoy a meal out with family. These activities form part of our identity as sentient, social beings. When such activities become impossible, or undertaking them requires military-style planning, it can make a disabled individual feel less than human and unable to participate fully in society. Even when access is available, the mere experience of using a wheelchair can be isolating. Instead of a sea of faces, the field of vision is occupied by legs and handbags and being elbowed or hit in the face, albeit accidentally, is not unusual. Staying at home may feel like defeat, but it can sometimes be a relief when the experiences of travel and the city are so unpleasant.











Images 7 & 8. Wheelchair users experience the city from a different perspective and a landscape of shops, restaurants and parks is replaced by legs and bags.

When access is denied, the impact is not only felt by disabled individuals but, on an unconscious level, by society as a whole. Inaccessible spaces and transport difficulties mean that many disabled people do not go into public spaces as much as they otherwise might. This means that they become invisible, almost non-existent or, at the other end of the scale, exotic objects of interest. When someone is out in a wheelchair, it is not uncommon for many people to stare at that individual or to talk to them differently, in short to treat them in a way that is different to others. In terms of movement, the effect of this on us, as a society, is that we come to think of 'normal' people as being able bodied and fitting in with the rhythms of society – able-bodied rhythms. There is a sad irony in the fact that so many people express the wish to live a slower-paced lifestyle and to decelerate and yet society expresses such impatience at those who cannot keep up with the pace as it now stands. Most would claim to care about the disabled and yet this is often not reflected in actions, for example, through impatience, verbal abuse, mockery, a refusal to give up seats and, for some, physical abuse.

Understandably all of this means that many disabled people will seek spaces and forms of mobility that do meet their needs. The shopping mall, chain restaurants and coffee bars, theme parks and out-of-town retail parks have often attracted the criticism of scholars for their uniformity and lack of authenticity, and because the car is required to get to these destinations, but it is frequently in these spaces where wheelchair users and those who have difficulty walking or standing for long periods are most comfortable. Lifts, automatic doors, accessible toilets and parking spaces are normally guaranteed and there are rarely steps to contend with. It is normal to see wheelchairs weaving through large shopping malls and it has often been our experience that the staff in such facilities are far better at interacting with wheelchair users, for example, by crouching down so that a conversation can be held on the same level. Possibly this is because they have received improved disability awareness training but it is quite likely the case that greater exposure to people with a range of disabilities has allowed staff to see and understand a host of individual needs and for a positive attitude to become normalised.

Yet there are steps that can be taken in terms of attitude and infrastructure to open up many more places to the disabled and to render society more open and accessible for all. When new infrastructure is planned, or changes are made, access should be a priority and not an afterthought. It is also imperative that people with a range of disabilities be consulted at every stage of planning and implementation. So many buildings and forms of transport claim to be accessible but it can appear to be merely a box ticking exercise with a range of real needs seemingly ignored: there might be ramps for wheelchairs but those same ramps are missing hand rails for those who are unsteady on their feet, or a lift might have been installed for wheelchairs but users find that it is too small inside to accommodate the majority of wheelchairs.

In recent years, advances in ICTs have opened doors to people with a range of disabilities. Those with visual impairments can now benefit from audio announcements on public transport that alert them to their location. Screens can provide a similar service to those with hearing loss. Automated doors aid those who, for a multitude of reasons, cannot open a door manually. Recently my wife was able to access a coach in her wheelchair by way of a side-entry lift. However, these technologies are only useful if priority is given to maintaining them and resolving problems as soon as they arise. Fixing a broken-down lift too often ranks low on lists of priorities. Subcontracting the management of facilities seems to contribute to this. A major train station in London had a lift to a lounge that was broken for months, thereby meaning that we could not use this. When confronted, the lounge staff simply blamed the company that managed the lifts and escalators and claimed that there was nothing they could do. Likewise, I have heard multiple accounts of blind individuals who have missed their station on public transport because of a faulty announcement system, often maintained by a separate firm. The rise of the Internet has proved a boon to those with disabilities who can now bank, shop and even socialise without the fear of encountering steps. However, one downside of this is that some shops now use this as a justification for not providing access in their physical locations, claiming that what is kept upstairs can be viewed and ordered online. Although this might be seen as providing an alternative form of access, the reality is that it creates two tiers of people and pushes those with disabilities further back into the home and away from the rest of society.

Finally, disabilities and the additional needs that they entail are also something that we need to bear in mind when talking about climate change. The transition away from oil-based mobility and rapid and deep de-carbonisation are vital for the health of the planet and for the future of our civilisation, and much of this will be achieved by changes in how we move around. This will mean walking more, cycling more and taking public transport. However, schemes that aim at this also need to recognise that there are many who cannot simply get on their bikes. Owing to the problems surrounding public transport that were discussed earlier, many of those with restricted mobility are heavily reliant on cars which offer the possibility of parking near to a desired location, provide a guaranteed seat, are comfortable and can hold mobility and/or medical equipment.

Massive changes to public transport will be needed for many disabled people to be physically able to use it, but also to feel confident and comfortable doing so. Yet even if these changes are made, it will still need to be recognised that cars will continue to serve an important role for lots of people, enabling them to access the same lifestyle and achieve the same goals as the able bodied, and to endure the hardships that many do not have to face, such as frequent routine and emergency hospital visits. Just as the West needs to shoulder a greater burden in terms of cutting carbon emissions in order to give developing countries the opportunity to improve standards of living, so too will greater allowances in terms of carbon budgets need to be made to those with disabilities. Moreover, many disabled people might have too small a carbon footprint. Carbon justice is not only a question of reducing our carbon footprint as a whole but of a fairer redistribution of energy use. A number of those with disabilities would see their lives substantially improved if they were able to be more mobile, should they so wish, and we should all be willing to make this possible.

Notes

- 1 Although statistics can vary depending on the criteria used to define disability, official figures suggest that over 13 million people in the UK alone have some form of disability. <https://www.scope.org.uk/media/disability-facts-figures>
 - 2 The Equality Act of 2010 does stress the need for public services to remove barriers to access. However, there are exemptions for listed buildings and proposed adjustments can be rejected on the basis of being 'unreasonable'. See <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/hpg/compliantworks/equalityofaccess/>
 - 3 See this article detailing a range of problems faced by the UK's disabled rail users: *Huffington Post*, 'No toilets, no seats, no way to leave...' https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/disabled-access-on-public-transport-trains_uk_5b4f4d34e4b0de86f488bda2?guccounter=1&guce_referrer_us=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2x1LmNvbS8&guce_referrer_cs=pYh5GbB7bh-wfMfScnlpNQ
 - 4 BBC News, 'Bus access to be improved for wheelchair users, ministers say', <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43330690>
 - 5 Since April 2017 it has been illegal for taxi drivers to charge disabled passengers more, yet this practice still occurs.
 - 6 *The Guardian* 'Five difficulties wheelchair users face when flying by plane', <https://www.theguardian.com/society/shortcuts/2018/sep/03/five-reasons-hard-to-fly-wheelchair-disabled-ryanair-flight>
- *The Times* 'Left behind at Heathrow yet again', <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/frank-gardner-left-behind-at-heathrow-yet-again-vtb5qqqrw> *The Times* 'Airlines are failing the disabled', <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/spinal-column-airlines-are-failing-the-disabled-xq25z7255>

Mobility

For the Mobile Lives Forum, mobility is understood as the process of how individuals travel across distances in order to deploy through time and space the activities that make up their lifestyles. These travel practices are embedded in socio-technical systems, produced by transport and communication industries and techniques, and by normative discourses on these practices, with considerable social, environmental and spatial impacts.

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Movement

Movement is the crossing of space by people, objects, capital, ideas and other information. It is either oriented, and therefore occurs between an origin and one or more destinations, or it is more akin to the idea of simply wandering, with no real origin or destination.

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Lifestyle

A lifestyle is a composition of daily activities and experiences that give sense and meaning to the life of a person or a group in time and space.

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