

Constructing Hierarchies: How the Built Environment of a University Contributes to Power Differentials Between Able-Bodied Students and Students with Disabilities

A Research Paper submitted to the Department of Engineering and Society

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia • Charlottesville, Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree
Bachelor of Science, School of Engineering

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Spring 2023

On my honor as a University Student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments

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Introduction

The most direct path to a college class often involves traversing over loose brick pavers, climbing a set or two of stairs, and navigating the confusing maze that is the basement of the building. The ability to get to this class unassisted and on time is a privilege. Not every student is going to interact with the built environment in the same way, whether that be in a physical sense or rather a sensory difference (Cassi et al., 2021). There are the students for whom the campus was built, who easily navigate the obstacle-ridden path to class, and then there are the others. The others deviate from the “normal” standard for the human body that most physical built environments are constructed to accommodate, creating the separating classification of “other” or “disabled” (Saltoğlu & Öksüz, 2016). By asserting that a university was built with one group of students in mind, there is the potential for a power dynamic to be established: those who fit the mold of the “normal,” standard body type, and the others. To develop an understanding of the differences between these student groups and whether a power differential and hierarchy truly exists between them, the question of how the physical built environment of a campus contributes to hierarchical power differentials between able-bodied students and students with disabilities will be examined.

Any impression of divisions between students on a university campus should be understood for their impact and possible resolution. However, the first step towards unifying students from different backgrounds and abilities would be to determine a root cause. Here the hypothesized root cause would be the perception of students with disabilities because of differences made obvious by lack of inclusivity in the built environment. The hypothesis is evaluated and researched utilizing Langdon Winner’s political technologies framework as it sets up the theory of technology playing a role in cultural understandings of hierarchies and how they

develop (Winner, 1980). The intended goal of the research will be to discover the role of the built environment in creating hierarchical power dynamics between able-bodied students and students with disabilities using the political technologies framework.

Research Question and Method

The use of discourse and documentary research analyses are employed to evaluate how the physical built environment of a university campus impacts the power differential between able-bodied, “normal,” students and students with disabilities. The University of Virginia (UVA) is the focus university for this research. Selecting a single university as the setting for this research is important, as specific and detailed accounts can be found pertaining to this one place, highlighting the dynamics that exist within that university. As the research question focuses on understanding how the built environment impacts access and divides a population, finding examples of the existence of these barriers at UVA is key. For that reason, discourse and documentary research approaches are taken. To find these specific and detailed accounts, newspapers such as *The Cavalier Daily* are used along with news and architecturally oriented databases to establish understanding of how these inhibitory built environments impact student life. Blogs that are specific to UVA are also used to contribute to examples of inhibitory environments, but to also highlight student perspectives that relate to life on UVA’s Grounds for an individual with a disability. Key words that are used in the search for documents and media that describe the UVA built environment include “disability,” “ADA,” “accessibility,” and “physical barriers” as these are words that are typical descriptors of differences in ability to use or occupy space. By focusing on documentary research and discourse analyses the question of access can be evaluated through time to describe how the physical built environment of the university impacts the power differential between able-bodied and disabled student groups.

Disability and the Physical Environment

The perception of disability can vary between groups. Disability scholars see disability as a situation and time-dependent experience (Garland-Thomson, 2005). Garland-Thomson suggests that “ability and disability are not so much a matter of the capacities and limitations of bodies but more about what we expect from a body at a particular moment and place,” delineating the idea of disability from the fault of individual and placing it on society and environment (2005). If disability is only to be seen as an individual issue and not as a “complex set of meanings located in cultural processes,” it then obstructs people from seeing others for who they are and instead they are viewed as where they are and how a specific situation differentiates them (Titchkosky, 2011, p. 48). Viewing disability through the lens of situations in which diverse populations were not considered aids in understanding how a power differential between those who are able-bodied and those who are disabled could be developed.

There are several examples of how space creates a divide between groups of people, essentially claiming the space for those who have access to it. Take Beacon Hill in Boston as an example of division and claiming space for a specific group. This area of Boston is known as historic, a tourist destination, and exclusive. Exclusivity in Beacon Hill takes shape in several ways. Some of Boston’s wealthiest residents call it home. Along with the affluence of its residents, only 2% of Beacon Hill’s sidewalk curbs meet ADA compliance as of 2019 (Liebermann, 2019). The homeowners in this area have previously refused to have ADA compliant sidewalks installed, as they believe they hold the “right to make design decisions about public space,” and it would be ruining the historic features of the neighborhood (2019). The residents of Beacon Hill stand as an example of creating a divide between those who are

able-bodied and those who are disabled while simultaneously claiming an entire public area as their own. They have asserted that they should be the only people to use the sidewalks, along with other able-bodied pedestrians, as the history of a sidewalk must stand over welcoming others into “their” space. In Beacon Hill, it is clear that there is a divide between those who can access the neighborhood and those who cannot, constructing a hierarchy as those who are disabled would not be able to easily live and navigate the neighborhood, precluding them from a club of Boston’s wealthiest and elite.

Based on the notion of a place and situation as the root of disability, it can be assumed that these places and situations, such as a confrontation with a set of stairs and a non-ADA compliant sidewalk, contribute to hierarchal differences between those who access a space with no issue and those with disabilities. University campuses would not be excluded from such access differences and hierarchal construction. Tanya Titchkosky explores the experience of a person who is disabled within a university environment in her book *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*. Titchkosky discusses different obstacles an individual with a disability might experience on a university campus, such as accessibility signs on doors and bathrooms that are not actually accessible, difficultly navigating confusing and poorly marked spaces, and being seen as only the “worst case scenario,” (2011). Examples of prohibitory design exist all over different built environments, such as neighborhoods and schools, giving a base to the question of how the physical built environment of a university campus constructs a hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities.

How Political Technologies Contribute to Hierarchies

To frame the topic of hierarchical power dynamics in the student body, Langdon Winner’s framework of political technologies, developed in his work of “Do Artifacts Have

Politics?” is applied. This framework intersects the idea that society gives technology intention, known by the framework of social construction of technology (SCOT), and the belief that technology shapes society through the framework of technological determinism (Winner, 1980, p. 122). Political technologies suggest there are technologies that are inherently linked to how power and authority are hierarchically organized within society (1980, p. 131). Through placing technology in the arena as something that contributes to the way that hierarchical structures evolve, a platform is provided for the discussion of how the physical environment of a college campus contributes to student power differentials.

Winner provides definitions for both “politics” and “technology” to frame his meaning behind “technological politics.” Winner defines politics as “arrangements of power and authority in human associations as well as the activities that take place within those arrangements.” He then goes on to define his use of “technology” as “all of modern practical artifice,” whereas “technologies” are “smaller or larger pieces or systems of hardware of a specific kind” (1980, p. 123). These definitions provide the basis for the use of the political technologies framework as the definition of technology that Winner uses emphasizes power differentials which form the core of the research question at hand.

Winner presents two interpretations of the political technologies theory. The first view takes a relatively small-scale approach regarding technology, in that it simply a tool for society, conveniently allowing for the “means of establishing patterns of power and authority.” The other view is that of a larger scale, in that technology is playing a more important and influential role as “tractable properties of certain kinds of technology are strongly, perhaps unavoidably, linked to particular institutionalized patterns of power and authority” (1980, p. 134). Each view works to further illustrate how technological politics works and how the scale can vary based on

perspective and application, showing that not every instance is going to be the same regarding the influence of technology.

Winner's framework has been used across several disciplines to exemplify disparities in power. One example would be the application of the political technologies framework to AI. In an article by Mark Garvey, he discusses how AI technologies could have helpful and beneficial uses, but also how these systems could have been purposefully designed to incorporate racial profiling aspects. The incorporation of racial profiling systems into the AI technology introduces biases that Garvey points out as inherent to the technology, falling into the larger scale, macro definition of political technologies that Winner gives (2021). On the other hand, Aditi Takle in their STS Research Paper argued that Amazon Go stores were discriminatory against low wage workers, displaying how the Amazon Go technology was applied in a biased manner (2020). The approach Takle takes is that of the smaller scale, more micro perspective that states how technology has aspects that when manipulated allow for the establishment of a power differential.

These competing scales of the influence of technology have garnered Winner some criticism when considering the appropriate use of the political technologies frameworks. Differing micro and macro scales of this framework mean that the political nature of technology varies depending on the scale applied (Donnelly, 1990). In the case of the macro scale in which technology is assumed to be culture, technology takes on a much larger and more significant role than it does in the micro scale, where it is presumably just an artifact (1990, p. 110). The political nature of technology is determined once the scale is properly decided, altering the role that the technology is playing in a political hierarchy (Donnelly, 1990, p. 111). Winner then falls short in this sense as a binary choice for how the framework is applied is necessary in its use: the

technology either has inherent political qualities or it is a vessel for political qualities. To prevent any confusion or differing roles that the physical environment may play in establishing a hierarchy among students, a macro perspective is used in regard to the political technologies framework.

The Physical Built Environment of UVA and its Impact

Ensuring accessibility has not always been the priority at UVA, giving way to the creation of hierarchical differences between those who can access spaces on Grounds with ease and those who cannot. The first part of the research looks specifically at the experience of students who are disabled on Grounds, delving into their holistic experience and not just those involving the physical built environment. Firsthand accounts from a UVA specific blog gave insight into the holistic student experience and help form the basis of how students with disabilities exhibit feelings of not belonging to the greater university community. In analyzing the accessibility of the Lawn over time, the way that students who are disabled are perceived by others possibly due to interactions with the physical built environment of Grounds is examined. The Lawn example points towards how lack of accessibility and lack of accounting for students who are disabled contributes to a hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities. It highlights how UVA had previously not provided the same opportunities for students who were disabled as compared to their peers, resulting in a hierarchy of students.

In the Eyes of Students

To consider and understand what it means to be an individual with a disability at a college or university today in the US, the individual must be thought of first. There is no discussion to be had or insight to be seen on the topic of living in a physical environment that

was not built for an individual with different abilities without the knowledge of those who have lived through that experience. Therefore, students and their perspectives must be at the center of research to answer the question of how the physical built environment of a college campus contributes to hierarchal differences between able-bodied students and students with disabilities.

The Disability Advocacy and Action Committee runs a blog titled *Disability@UVA* that chronicles the stories of students, alumni, and faculty and their experiences regarding disability and accessibility, among other topics. The blog has posts regarding being a deaf student on Grounds, life with a service dog, conflicts between the request for accessible accommodations to be made and the desire by others to preserve the historical environment, and the history of the disability rights movement at UVA (*Disability@UVA*, 2022). These posts allow readers to potentially get a glimpse of what it means to experience disability on Grounds and what those who are most familiar with different situations deem as necessary for positive change. Posts such as the ones on the *Disability@UVA* blog are vital for illustrating and determining the ways in which the physical environment impacts student hierarchies between those who are able-bodied and those who are seen as disabled.

A common theme in many of these blog posts would be the relation to how accessibility seems to be an afterthought throughout different experiences on UVA's Grounds. Xara Davies highlights the lack of accessibility included in various student activities and events, stating that "accessibility is not optional; it is a necessity," when planning such events, as inclusion has not previously been the standard (2019). Another student explains the lack of consideration to accessibility in their architecture curriculum while at UVA and why it needs to be a larger part of what is taught in architecture classes (Goroshi, 2021). A post from another student author describes how other students interact with the service dogs of those with disabilities in a manner

that marginalizes “disabled individuals by treating them as though they don’t exist or lack an identity beyond their adaptive equipment,” (Regner, 2022). Again, the theme between these posts has a lot to do with how students who are disabled often are left on the outside and marginalized by their peers and university. That could be said for how they are represented in the curriculum, the lack of inclusion in student activities, and then the marginalization of students in social settings.

While these posts do not necessarily point towards the physical environment as the cause of these divisions, these stories are important to include as they give a basis for how students with disabilities are perceived. It is clear through what the authors of those posts have written that individuals with disabilities at UVA are not always considered, included, or acknowledged, highlighting a social and hierarchical divide between student groups. With these stories and noted experiences of students with disabilities providing a base of understanding for how those with disabilities are seen at UVA, the way that the physical environment may contribute to divisions between students can be further investigated and analyzed.

Automatic Door Opener

To highlight how the physical environment plays a role in the marginalization of students with disabilities, the post by student Michelle Miles provides an insightful example to begin the conversation. In her post, she discusses her experience in attempting to have an automatic door opener installed so that she may access one of her classrooms independently (2018). Through her post she describes how her request for the installation of the automatic door opener in Monroe House contradicted UVA’s goal and desire to preserve history (2018). By UVA not providing the automatic door opener, it signaled to Miles that her presence was not a priority and, in a way, not accepted. She stated that her “presence felt unnatural” due to the design of the original

building not accounting for those with disabilities. These feelings were also expressed in the sentiment that making buildings accessible would be “invasive” and a “nightmare” for the school, something that Miles took personally and felt was a reflection of how those with disabilities were viewed (2018).

The case Miles demonstrates in her post showcases how students with disabilities are viewed by UVA. The university, in her case, put the building above an individual in order to preserve the history of the space. The accommodations that would have to be made for the door to be accessible were described as a “nightmare” and “invasive.” These are feelings, that as Miles described, were felt as a reflection of how people felt about the presence of students with disabilities, making Miles feel unwelcomed and as if she did not belong to the UVA community. The action of not installing an automatic door opener, thereby placing the history of a door knob above accessibility, exhibits how the technology of a door knob can marginalize a whole group of students, constructing a hierarchy through who is able to access the space.

Students with disabilities in this case were placed as a second priority, putting the role of the door knob as a marker of history and culture first. It stood as a symbol of how people interact with each other and the world around them, seen through the language used and feelings of those involved. A simple door knob created a physical and social divide between Miles and her peers, demonstrating the macro perspective of Winner’s political artifact framework. The door knob’s inherent ability to limit the access of some to a space provides a prime example of the macro perspective as it unavoidably permits the continued exclusion of those with disabilities in any interaction to be had in that space. The symbol of the door knob as a marker of history along with its use as a piece of technology help illuminate how the physical built environment plays a

role in constructing a power divide between students who are able-bodied and those with disabilities.

The Case of the Lawn

The example given through Miles' blog post starts the examination of how the physical built environment impacts the student experience and creates a hierarchy among students. Yet, this example only provides one view of the divisions between the two specific student groups: students who are able-bodied and students with disabilities. To better determine how the physical environment influences the hierarchy between students another example must also be considered and analyzed. That is where the case of the Lawn comes into play. Several resources have pointed to the Lawn as an example of an exclusionary physical built environment (Centofante & Martin, n.d.; Miles, 2018). By way of highlighting the exclusive nature of the environment and architecture, the Lawn becomes a marker of something that contributes to constructing the hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities.

The original Grounds that Thomas Jefferson imagined for UVA consisted of what he referred to as the "Academical Village," consisting of the pavilions and attached lawn rooms (*The Lawn | Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library*, n.d.). The idea for the "Academical Village" would be for students to live in dormitories attached to the larger pavilions where professors would reside, a practice still followed today (Reid, 2017). Lawn rooms at UVA are seen as a high honor, with only 54 students (excluding the Range rooms reserved for graduate students) being chosen to live in them each year (*The Lawn at the University of Virginia*, n.d.). UVA was founded in 1819 and in the over 200 years that the Academical Village and Lawn rooms have been providing students lodging, no documentation was discovered that would suggest a student with a disability limiting physical mobility has ever lived in one of the

54 rooms (*About the University / The University of Virginia*, 2018; Miles, 2018). Students with disabilities were excluded from the club of Lawn residents, one of the highest honors at UVA, for the entire existence of the university. The history of who has lived in those 54 rooms and who has not marks a clear divide between able-bodied students and students with disabilities.

The Lawn itself was not explicitly made accessible until 2020 with the installation of ramps and Lawn room renovations to provide space for accessible living (Kelly, 2020). Prior to the ramp installation, there were physical barriers of stairs that allowed people of able-body to get from one level of the Lawn to the next, but there were no access points on the Lawn for those with limited mobility who could not manage the stairs. The ramps were opened in February of 2019, making the entire Lawn accessible so that “a disabled or infirm person can experience and traverse the length of the historic Lawn,” (Newman, 2019; Centofante & Martin, n.d.). The ability to “traverse” the entire Lawn before the installation of the ramps was seen as impossible without exiting the Lawn at each tier and reentering (Miles, 2018). The simple activity of moving through the brick path on the sides of the Lawn or being able to get from one tier to another to enjoy the weather while out with friends was effectively off limits to those with disabilities that made it impossible or difficult to climb stairs.

The change in the landscape to add ramps displayed steps towards inclusion in a thoughtful manner. The Academical Village along with the Rotunda are a UNESCO World Heritage Site, meaning that there is a responsibility to preserve the site and manage the requirements that make it historic and a place of recognition (*Monticello and the University of Virginia in Charlottesville*, n.d.). When altering a historic site, such as the Lawn at UVA, extensive care must be taken. However, the preservation of the World Heritage Site was not the only aspect of the Lawn that took great consideration and care. The idea of the ramp was settled

on for a few reasons; options such as an elevator or lift had potential safety and code issues, but were also seen as potential dividers (Clemmons, 2018). The thought being that something like a lift or elevator would draw attention to the user as someone different when a ramp does not draw the same attention as it can be used by all in a ubiquitous fashion (2018). In this case, the ramp, which would be a more invasive project on historic landscape than that of a lift or elevator, was chosen, not just due to the safety and code issues that came along with the other options, but because it presented a more equal playing field when it came to perception. The installation of these ramps does more in some respect than just making the Lawn accessible, but also displayed the thought and care that should go into these projects along with how history cannot be an excuse to avoid ensuring accessibility.

Accessible Lawn rooms are perhaps a less obvious change to the physical environment than the installation of ramps, but still serve as an example of changing exclusionary features to those of inclusion on Grounds. The Lawn room project was started in 2020 with the goal of having rooms 23 and 25 West Lawn available for students to live in for the 2020-2021 academic year (*UVA to Have First ADA-Compliant Rooms Completed by Beginning of Academic Year*, n.d.). In order to get these rooms to be ADA compliant, new brickwork that would make the exterior entry level with the interior floor had to be laid, light switches had to be lowered, plumbing adjustments had to be made, along with lowering the mirror, shelves, and closet rod (Kelly, 2020). These changes were made with great care as to ensure historic preservation by not impacting historic features and choosing rooms that would lead to the least level of intervention needed (2020). As with the installation of ramps on the Lawn, this project made it so accessibility did not take a back seat to historic preservation. In this case, the preservation of

history and accessibility work together to make the historic honor of living in a Lawn room possible for all students.

Constructing Otherness

While the divide and hierarchy that exists between able-bodied students and students with disabilities does not necessarily find its root in the physical built environment, it does contribute to it. Stories such as the ones described in the section *In the Eyes of Students* demonstrate that idea, such as the story regarding an individual who has a service dog and how they feel marginalized by the interactions that they have with their peers as a result of an accommodation for their disability. When considering stories such as that one and the other stories already described, the hierarchy that forms between the two student groups may be more related to how disability is viewed culturally and in relation to one's identity.

For those who may not be physically disabled or those who are chronically ill, their identity of being an individual with a disability is not always seen (Whitlock, 2022). Similar to that of a statement from Rosemarie Garland-Thomas, students at the University of Virginia see their disabilities as a set of barriers that society has placed on them (2005; 2022). In Whitlock's article, students who are chronically ill or not necessarily visibly disabled currently feel a divide between themselves and their peers (2022). They believe the association of their disability or illness as part of their identity, their needs, and the perception of them by their peers would be different if everyone viewed their disability as part of identity the way they do (2022). Through work to better understand disability and how it is a part of one's identity can help alleviate the divide and hierarchy that exists between students due to cultural aspects. In time, perhaps the view of students who are chronically ill or disabled by their peers and acknowledgment of their

identity may aid in the efforts for a more inclusive Grounds when it comes to the physical built environment.

However, while the fight for inclusion for some students hinges on their identity and the acceptance of that by their peers, which is not the case for everyone. For some students with mobility limitations, the physical built environment poses a barrier to their inclusion in university life. The story of Michelle Miles demonstrates this well; she could not independently open a door to get to her classroom and was faced with a physical barrier (2018). The attempts to provide the automatic door opener failed due to the wish to preserve history, a history that had never included someone like Miles and had never considered being a space for all people. Here, the fight for inclusion failed due to the cultural impact and symbol of the door knob. The door knob stood as a symbol of history and what once was, a history of exclusion. By keeping the door knob in place and refusing the request of an automatic door opener, the divide and hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities was exemplified.

In this example, students who are able to open the door by using the door knob are seen as those accepted as part of history, included in the story of that building. That was something that was being denied to Miles, she would not be able to participate in the history of that space the same way her peers were able to. Winner suggests that technology in a macro view plays a role in the power one possesses because of the inherent cultural impact of that technology (1980). The door knob is a prime example of that, it provides access to inclusion in history and independence for some, for Miles it stood as a barrier to that inclusion and something purposefully keeping her outside. The door knob was a symbol of the history of the building, part of the culture of the building, giving entry only to those who could use it. It would then follow that the door knob acts as a symbol of culture, falling in line with Winner's theory in the macro

view of the inherent properties of technology contributing to hierarchical development. Her exclusion from independently accessing the classroom demonstrates the idea that Winner presented in how the technology being used is linked to one group's power (1980). In this case, the power of the group originated from their ability to access the space and the history inside all due to one door knob. This story echoes that of Beacon Hill in Boston, in preserving history one group is excluded from being part of that history and being part of the story of that area or building (Liebermann, 2019). It is as if saying that since they have never belonged, since those with disabilities have never had a place here, they never will.

When looking at the Lawn for how it as a physical built environment contributes to the hierarchy between students there is direction of positive change. Living on the Lawn is a great honor at UVA with many students aspiring one day to be as great as those who they see residing in the historic rooms (Reid, 2017). The process for being chosen to live on the Lawn is rigorous, with criteria of academic growth, extracurricular activities, and engagement as a few categories (2017). Through a several step process, the "best" students are chosen to represent the university and their peers with residence on the Lawn during their final undergraduate year at UVA (2017). However, with there not being any ADA compliant rooms until the 2020-2021 academic year and living in one of these rooms for a student with limited mobility being essentially impossible, it was as if the university was saying they were not worthy of the honor (Kelly, 2020).

Prior to the renovation students who could not physically access the rooms due to physical barriers could not have the honor of living in one. They were excluded from one of the greatest honors an undergraduate student at UVA can have. Excluding them from that honor created a power divide between able-bodied students and students with disabilities. Here, the physical built environment of the Lawn and the Lawn rooms created a hierarchy between student

groups. By simply not being able to access the rooms, students with disabilities were automatically less than their peers who were seen as the best the fourth year class had to offer or worthy of the honor of living on the Lawn. The physical built environment of those rooms played a role in the power dynamic as that is what determined who could enter, who could have the honor. There may have been a rigorous process of applying and deliberation as to who was accepted, but the final say was the physical barrier. Similar to that of the door knob and Beacon Hill, the Lawn's physical barriers were deciding who was able to be part of history and who was worthy. Physical barriers played a role in who was part of history, who was worthy of an honor, and who had access to something, thereby contributing to a hierarchical divide between able-bodied students and students with disabilities.

In the same way that the door knob stood as a symbol of culture in Winner's macro perspective, so does the Lawn. The qualities of the landscape and built environment made it so only certain people could access the space and only certain people could live there. These qualities were what led to exclusion, again pointing towards Winner's macro view, as they were unavoidably linked to the power of those who were able-bodied. The physical built environment was a "natural" way for those in power to continue to exclude those who found the environment to be inaccessible. An individual's inability to ascend the stairs from tier to tier on the Lawn meant that they did not have access to the Lawn in its entirety. An individual's inability to enter or easily move around a Lawn room meant that they were not worthy of living there. Winner's macro view of political technology lines up perfectly here as those in power did not need to employ the technology in any particular way to generate a power differential, but rather the technology and architecture of the Lawn did it for them. Through the simple existence of the Lawn and the physical built environment of the Academical Village, a power hierarchy was

constructed that gave power and honors to those who were able-bodied and denied it from those who were disabled.

The renovation of Lawn rooms and the Lawn mark a positive change in the narrative of physical barriers deciding who is a part of history and who deserves a high honor at UVA. It took about 200 years of excluding those with physical disabilities for the changes to be made and that part of history will always remain. However, with the changes comes a new age of history and a new age of inclusion. Through including students with disabilities in the opportunity to live on the Lawn and to be considered one of the best in their class, the part of the hierarchy between students that rested on physical barriers can start to be torn down. Inclusion here took priority over history, meaning that in future works and accessibility projects, the preservation of a building or landmark can no longer be an excuse to not change something. By placing accessibility first, the hierarchy is torn down in another way, as it demonstrates that physical barriers have no place in the history that is yet to be made. UVA is demonstrating that for the first time in 200 years, people of all abilities have a place in the history of the university and physical barriers will no longer determine who belongs and who does not. The contributions of physical barriers to a hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities can start to be dismantled.

Limitations

The limitations of this paper exist in several forms, from the research method to the perspectives that were considered. The perspective of students who are disabled was the focus of this paper. However, the goal of the research was to try and determine how the physical built environment contributes to a power hierarchy between students who are able-bodied and students who are disabled. There are two perspectives present in that hierarchical structure. The absence

of the view of students who are able-bodied limits the research in that their understanding of their peers who are disabled was missing. Their perspective would have been helpful in trying to elicit the nature of how the physical built environment impacts the interpersonal relationships between the two identified student groups.

Another limitation would be the research method that was used. Discourse and documentary research are useful when the analysis being done can rely on perspectives that have already been well documented. The basis of these methods would be to use existing resources. However, it is possible that not every perspective or every opinion on a matter has been documented. It is also possible that there were documents that were not found. The use of discourse and document research are dependent on the ability to find the resources that would aid in analysis of the question at hand. If the resources cannot be properly found, then this could contribute to the missing perspective or opinion. With that in mind, the research methods here are in some ways contributors to the limitations of this paper.

Future Directions

The methods that were used focused solely on documents and resources that already exist. The basis of discourse and documentary research would be to use what is already available. While these methods provide useful information and can give insight into past events, they do not necessarily keep up with the present. They also do not always take into account every perspective. In order to take research on this topic further, it would be pertinent to interview students on their current experiences with the physical environment and their fellow students. The goal of interviewing students in the future would be to access current and relevant information all while incorporating perspectives that may not have been considered within documents and other available resources. With that it would be important to interview students

who are both able-bodied and those who have a disability in order to incorporate both perspectives of the potential hierarchy of students.

While interviewing students, another future direction may become clear. The research done here focuses mainly on the classroom and university provided housing. Obviously, the student experience at college goes far beyond just the classroom and a dorm. It would be important in any future works to look past just classroom and on campus housing accessibility. In a blog post for Disability@UVA, alumni Evan Dunks expressed this exact sentiment by stating that “making the classroom accessible is only part of the job – the student experience as a whole is what needs to be open to everyone” (2019). The accessibility of off campus housing, nearby restaurants, university sponsored events such as concerts and sporting events, among other possible activities should all be considered in future works. By looking past the classroom, other aspects of the student experience can be examined for how accessibility possibly impacts student relations.

Another possible future direction would be to consider and research the experience of students who are not neurotypical or have a non-obvious disability. The research done here focuses fairly heavily on the experience of students with physical disabilities and how the physical built environment impacts their experience. However, the physical built environment may have impacts on students who are not neurotypical that are not necessarily the same as students with a physical disability. A ramp that one student requires may not be the accessibility need of another student, another student who is perhaps not neurotypical may have issue with the lighting of a building or the acoustics thereby making building inaccessible to them.

Conclusion

While the hierarchy that exists between abled-bodied students and students with disabilities exists due to more factors than just the physical built environment, physical barriers played a role in constructing that hierarchy. For centuries physical barriers decided who was a part of history and who was not, who received praise and who did not, who was worthy of an honor and who were unworthy at the University of Virginia. The barriers could be small, such as a door knob, but the desire to preserve history took precedence over inclusion. By placing one over the other, a hierarchy forms. Those who can access a space and see no physical barrier are allowed to be part of history while those who cannot are excluded from that history and all it means to be a part of that, from prestige to having a student experience similar to that of their peers. However, with continued action, such as renovations done to Lawn rooms 23 and 25, along with the installation of the ramps on the Lawn, the hierarchy that exists between the two student groups can start to be dismantled. Again, physical barriers do not comprise the entire reason that hierarchy was constructed in the first place, there are other factors, such as the cultural factors that must also be addressed. Yet, positive change has started to be made regarding physical barriers at UVA and if those continue, along with cultural changes, the hierarchy between able-bodied students and students with disabilities could be brought down.

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