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Topher Endress

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Peace, Disability, and the Violence of the Built Environment

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INTRODUCTION

"In all wars and disasters people with disabilities are treated as the bottom of the pile. They are the first to die; the first to contract disease and infection; and the last to receive resources and medicines when they are handed out… not only is disability caused by conflict, but conflict and displacement exacerbate existing barriers and challenges experienced by those already affected by disability, such as access to security, information, aid, and other basic needs." So states Roberta L. Francis in her 2019 article, "Searching for the Voice of People with Disabilities in Peace and Conflict Research and Practice." Peace studies as a field is intrinsically tied together with disability discourse, a fact sadly unheeded in the vast majority of peace studies literature (with acknowledgement to *Peace Studies*' special issue on disabilities (vol. 31 iss. 4) also published in 2019. As Wolbring notes, "disabled people highlight one particular factor in peace and conflict that is omnipresent… conflict based on divergent ability expectations (2011)." Therefore, this article seeks to add to the emerging interplay between peace and disability studies by looking at the ethics of the built environment as a shared medium highlighting the natural connections between the fields.

Breaking Francis' statement into discrete parts, each definition can offer insight into how disability studies and peace studies might begin to coalesce. To begin, how are we to understand the group of people that Francis categorizes as "people with disabilities?" Various fields use a diverse array of definitions to mark boundaries between who is disabled and who isn't, with broad groupings dividing into a number of divergent

definitions. These models of disability might rely on normative claims about bodies, as the 'medical model' derives ideals from averages and medians across human diversity. Those who stray too far from these centering marks are categorized as 'disabled' or 'exceptional,' with various labels given to any number of diagnosable conditions. Within this broad category, however, one can find a biomedical model which privileges health as normative, a professional model rooted in external epistemology, or a diversity model in which accepts disability as an intrinsic aspect of human experience.

Two other major models are 'disability as tragedy' and 'the social model,' both of which include blurry, liminal lines. Tragic models often link disability to charity and pity or to punishment and moral failure/sin. Negotiating these definitions of disabilities means accepting some overlaps. For example, someone who needs oxygen to support lung function might be seen as deficient under a medical model, but also pitiable (Charity model), and also segregated from desired relationships because of the ostracizing effect of their explicit healthcare needs (Relational model), and also deserving of punishment for past 'sins' like smoking (Punishment model).

Disability Studies is generally the academic field which investigates the mechanisms active in the social models (Social/Structures; Identity/Affirmation; Minority/Social location; Economic/Market; Relational/Community) while critiquing the other major models. In constructing and critiquing the definition and treatment of disability across various contexts, this field offers a significant insight into how notions of peace might be widened to include various disability-adjacent fields. This article is most concerned with violence within the built environment, which can resonate deeply with disabilities given that accessibility is often mere inches away from inaccessibility, as in the case of appropriately wide doors or reasonably sloped ramps.

Disability and Conflict

Disability as a concept inherently marks conflict. There are of course strict guides to what constitutes a 'disability' in order to receive care within various medical and government institutions. Although it is clear that warfare is a direct producer of disabilities, such as PTSD or limb and hearing loss (Palmer et al. 2019), it is less clear what marks a condition severe enough to warrant care. For example, the USA's Department of Veterans Affairs states that "veterans must have [developed] the diseases within the time frames shown below and have a current disability as a result of that disease in order to receive disability compensation." These can be stricter based on the particular diagnosis: "Brucellosis - A bacterial disease with symptoms

such as profuse sweating and joint and muscle pain. The illness may be chronic and persist for years. It must be at least 10 percent disabling within one year from the date of military separation (VA 2016)." Allen and Lektzian show that long term impacts of ostensibly peaceful resolutions like economic sanctions ultimately produce disabilities, as well (2013).

Disability and Peace

If there is a link between disability and violence, there must also be a link between disability and peace. How might we understand that relationship? Now with an appropriately wide lens from which to understand the term 'disability,' we must take an equally wide view of 'peace.'

Many religions offer definitions of peace relating to positive or additive effects - peace is something created or added, rather than the mere absence of conflict. For example, the Jewish concept of *shalom* is often understood, albeit simplistically, in this way. A positive definition of peace runs counter to many of the presumptive models of peace which emerge from the combination of specific forms of disability modeling with moral conceptions about the worth or value of disability as an experience. For instance, when identifying disability as the result of economic sanctions, as Allen and Lektzian do, peace functions as the absence of economic violence, manifesting in the absence of preventable disabilities. Similarly, Palmer et al and Brück, de Groot, and Schneider uncover disabling effects of war, with peace set as the absence of overt conflict, again manifesting in the absence of acquired disabilities.

Even when calling for greater access to Peace Studies and a heightened sense of disability critique, Francis (who is herself disabled) relies on the common understanding of peace and disability as linked by warfare and displacement. This places disability as an external event which happens *to* a normative body, rather than acknowledging disability as an expected process of human life unfolding and even less as a thing to be potentially celebrated. There is certainly room for naming that disabilities are caused by violence, but conflating disability with violence ontologically is to deny a sense of humanity to the disabled identity. Berghs calls the trajectory of this 'necropolitics,' which involves 'ontological insecurity' and is produced and enforced within the supposed humanitarianisms of the refugee camp. For instance, the dead and disabled body becomes a signal rather than a thing in and of itself. Thus, to reify the ideological claims of the State (or the refugee camp, for Berghs' work), bodies must be continuously mangled and killed. The tension creates a violence against the vulnerable and prevents true resolution (Berghs 2015).

FINDING COMMON GROUND

If Peace Studies is to find common ground with Disability Studies, it must also free itself from definitions of disability which necessarily posit disabled experiences as outcomes of violence and conflict. For some, this tension leads to a recovery of religious and theological understandings. A different means to understand peace as informed by disability involves a disavowing of the binary between 'peace-as-positive' and 'peace-as-absence.' Rather, disabled experiences challenge us to acknowledge a definition of peace as a right relationship with space and time.

'Peace-as-embodied-in-fitting-structures' is perhaps not a commonly named aspect of Peace Studies nor of Disability Studies, but is certainly a helpful overlap (if cumbersome in title) between the two fields. To uncover this disability-influenced definition, Francis relies primarily on Galtung's construction of a three-part evaluation of forms of violence. This includes direct violence (hate crimes), structural violence (works perpetrated by institutions and systems out of the control of individuals), and cultural violence (symbols, beliefs, and ideologies). Violence occurring through any of these mechanisms stems at least in part from a disconnect between the lives of real people and their situations/environments. Although clearly some violence and disabling conditions can be overtly connected, not all disabilities can or should be linked in such a way. This is where a connection to the built environment proves useful.

For the purpose of this article, a fairly straight line can be drawn between these major tenants of peace and the violence of the built environment thanks to the works of Harvey (1996), Springer (2011), Lefebvre (1991), and McKenzie (1977). Just as in Galtung's three-part conception of peace (1990), space (understood socially) likewise has three co-constitutive parts (named here by Lefebvre): spatial practice (daily life), representations of space (maps, symbols with institutional/cultural backing), and representational space (beliefs, ideologies). The ideology of maintaining a center in relation to social peripheries perpetuates violence against those currently marginalized in their social systems, but this is a different form of violence and a different form of disability production than a case of direct violence.

SEEKING PEACE

Seeking peace necessitates critiquing and remodeling the built environment. Each aspect of social space can and does inflict violence, disrupting theoretical and practical expressions of peace. Ideologies, practices, and self-replicating institutions form a productive and reflexive cycle which

creates embodiments and structures and in turn mutually produce one another. Naturally, this is the theory level; disability is a malformation within the environment, but only because the environment self-selects against disability. It is a recursive strategy, relying on conceptions of disability in order to build against it, then disabling that which is excluded. So where is the genesis?

It's disability and exclusion all the way down. There has never been a time when disability did not mean something more than the physical or intellectual expression of a particular phenotype. Disability has always been taken as a sign, or a significant experience which provides some level of insight into the hidden workings of the world. In many cases, those signs were rejected as evils (exposure, infanticide, asylums, etc.), and only recently has real ethical work been done to maintain an anti-ableist account of 'wonder' within disability (most accounts rely on 'disability as holy innocent' tropes/"my special angel from heaven" which is violently dehumanizing to both individuals and communities)

Whether we accept any sort of religious framework, disabilities are in a vertical relation with our ideology. As Nancy Eiesland (1994) posited, "disability has never been religiously neutral, but is shot through with theological significance." This holds true whether we accept some sort of organized faith or whether we simply hold to any sort of ethics which identifies any level of belief in something from outside of our individuated experiences.

An Analogy of Race

Based on the work of Willie James Jennings (2011), one way to understand the concept of race is through a similar lens. "Land and body are connected at the intersection of European imagination and expansion. The imagined geography diminished in strength as a more authentic and accurate geography emerged. The scale of existence, however, with white (unharmed) flesh at one end and black (harmed) flesh at the other, grew in power precisely in the space created by Portuguese expansion into new lands."

Likewise, the Scottish theologian John Mair redefined Aristotle's *phusei doulon* as a 'figure without the use of reason' who was by nature a slave and equated that term with the totality of peoples in this 'new world.' His work was introduced into the Spanish Law of Burgos (1512) called by King Ferdinand which sought to justify the colonization of the Americas, which made it the predominant interpretation (even if this is a misreading of Aristotle).

Jennings uncovered a malformed doctrine of creation, which allowed Christian Europeans to treat the Americas as a thing to be created by them, whereas Europe and its people were to be received as a creation given by God (*creatio continua* vs. *creatio ex nihilo*). But that's merely the ideology. It also took ships, monarchies, armies, financiers, and arms dealers to make it happen, and individuals had to commit the actions of enslaving, colonizing, subjugating, killing, disabling, and dominating. The ideology, the presence of armies, the daily experience of a life disrupted by invaders, the reshaping of land through the planting of new crops and increased mining, the direct violence committed against indigenous populations, and the establishment of institutions to uphold these practices over time are all aspects of violence which create disabilities in various ways - some direct, others through social exclusions. Social space was built with respect to ideals, symbols, direct experience, and conceptual expectations, and these resulted in large swatches of people being made marginal and excluded on the basis of perceived racial difference and disability. Race and disability are often still linked in today's world, but this historical example shows how they played into one another with disastrous and violent geopolitical consequences.

BUILDING TODAY

Studying the intersecting points on peace, the built environment, and disabilities is certainly important. But in order to make use of this information, we can't stop at the ideological level. These intersections are not limited to the past. Rather, how we built social spaces today creates disabilities while also crafting social and moral meaning about said disability. Thus, seeking peace requires more than the abolition of negative actions or the propagation of positive ones. Rather, we must interrogate the social space we continue to build in order to challenge not just the developing of disabling conditions but also the system which sets disabilities as an inherently negative thing to be avoided.

First, this requires reading the built environment, including logistics, as a form of ethics. All forms of architecture, from skyscrapers to classrooms, contain inherent expectations around who is welcomed into said space, as well as what actions and relations are made possible. Although some actions might appear value-neutral, every aspect of the decision-making process which leads to specific zoning laws, material usage, limitations on access, and thus the expectation of the purpose of the building or space, can be shown to be both ethical and political. A building is only as peaceful as the most violent labor practice used in its construction, and

every subsequent use offers chances for peace-building practices or conflict.

Beyond mere construction practices, which cause a significant amount of disabling conditions worldwide regardless of worker protections, social spaces are in continuous use with only some actions made possible. One may rightly expect to find farming an impossible action on the 43rd floor of a luxury hotel, and this may at first blush appear to be the obvious and practical outcome of a simple logistical impossibility. However, the mere presence of such a building can only come as the product of a series of choices. Thus, reading a building as ethics not only challenges us to question issues of access and accommodation for disabled users, but to ask whether the purpose and history of the building is in line with the ethical frameworks desired for a peaceful world. In other words, it isn't enough to question whether the building is accessible to someone who uses visual supports or a person using a wheelchair, or even to challenge the energy consumption and sourcing of materials/labor, but to ask whether the actions undertaken within that place further a culture of violence and oppression against marginal peoples.

Praxis

Several practical tools exist that can aid the pursuit of building peace into the built environment and social spaces. Bridging Disability Studies and Peace Studies ensures that toolkits can be continuously critiqued and reevaluated to better address emerging questions of inherent and systematic violence. Firstly, developing disability-centric practices of peace building must come from disabled communities and people. For largely non-disabled activists, academics, and institutions, establishing support within domination or direct leadership is imperative. In a largely capitalist world, not paying disabled people for their insights and labor is a form of violence.

Accessibility audits can help identifying spatial practices which perpetuate environmental violence against disabled bodies. These can be used not just for physical structures, but can help uncover friction in any process that leads to further marginalization of disabled users. Within this, two major design options exist to address identified points of environmental violence: universal design and person-centered planning. Universal design, which emerged through the work of Ron Mace at North Carolina State University, offers an evolving set of standards which seek to build for the widest possible range of embodiments. Approaching from an opposite angle, person-centered planning asks, 'what can be changed in the moment to better account for someone's support needs?' These

tools, when taken together, help address the three-part aspects of social space as outlined above, rather than fixated purely on the immediate experience of environmental violence.

For example, imagine a refugee family who needs to travel from a temporary shelter to a state-supported house in a new community. The family may have a language barrier, as well as trauma associated with displacement and uncertainties. Thus, an airplane may be an overwhelming, triggering, and/or confusing experience. An accessibility audit identifies potential problems within the process of documenting, flying, and arriving in the new location, such as a reliance on unfamiliar language for safety directions, unclear signage, or emotional traumas associated with seeing one's few possessions moved out of sight under the promise that said luggage will be available in the new location. Universal design would challenge the airline to ensure that every person, regardless of language, ability, or emotional/psychological needs, can fly without experiencing further violence within that environment. Person-centered planning would instead ask how this family in particular might benefit from changes to the process that account for unique needs, such as allowing a greater amount of carry-on luggage than typical that thus never leaves the family's sight. Finally, Disability Studies asks every actor within this example to question how displacement disproportionately affects those already most marginal while challenging the world systems which allow for some families to be violently displaced in the first place.

CONCLUSION

Peace Studies has much to offer to the experience of disabilities across cultures, and Disability Studies in turn has much to offer to pursuits of peace. This is especially apparent when considering questions of the built environment and social spaces, linking exclusions and marginalization to violence done both in direct action and in implicit society-building. The tools of accessible design can aid both fields in their mutual pursuit of a peace which emerges from rightly fitting in one's own physical and social environment.

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Rev. Dr. Topher Endress is a researcher in the Center for Spirituality, Health, and Disability at the University of Aberdeen (UK). E-mail: topher.endress@abdn.ac.uk