Most of the time people think disability is a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities. In other words, disability is a condition that limits a person…. which is wrong. Disability is not a condition that someone has that limits them. Rather, disability is the experience someone has of being limited by the conditions around them.

I’m a designer, and as a designer I am trying to change existing conditions into preferred ones. The question that most concerns me is what is the result of the conditions I’m creating? Limitations or possibilities?

A community’s built form—the human-made surroundings that range from buildings and parks or green space to neighborhoods and cities—establishes the conditions of possibility for how people live in the place. A supportive environment provides opportunities for self-determination and facilitates participation in everyday activities and relationships. These communities’ built form establish conditions which foster belonging and quality of life. The opposite is also true, and unsupportive environments can make it difficult to participate in the activities of daily life and lead to people feeling isolated and marginalized.

Rarely is one community supportive and another unsupportive. Most communities are both: many of their members are supported and some are not. In particular, while people with disabilities live in communities, they may often still not be a part of their community. They are in the community, but not of it. Why? At least in part, because the conditions established by the built form of the community create limitations to their participation.

People with disabilities have long advocated for greater participation in their communities. The built form of communities encompasses many of the supports key to including individuals with disabilities; access to public accommodation and services including recreational, educational, commercial, and civic and social activities, employment opportunities, appropriate housing, and convenient transportation access. These are the activities of daily life. Community planning and design professionals work toward many of these aspects of accessibility, calling their efforts walkability, transportation equity, transit-oriented development, Complete Streets, aging-in-place, placemaking, etc. But if you bring everything together, carefully planning and designing the conditions of the community to eliminate environmental barriers to people with disabilities, fewer people will be left out of the life of the community.

My colleagues and I work with our students to change the existing conditions of communities into ones that foster belonging and quality of life for all their members. It is the responsibility of every designer to create just and equitable environments.

Are you a designer? Are you trying to change existing conditions into preferred ones? What part of the community are you designing? Are you creating conditions of possibilities? Working together, each of us that contributes to our community can build a stronger, more just, and equitable future for our community.

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