

# Reasonable Access for Mobility-Disabled Persons is More Than Widening the Door

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*The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) introduced enforced accommodations implemented by retail businesses for disabled shoppers. Despite such legislation, disability advocates and disabled shoppers report that access remains incomplete. In this article I investigate an apparent dilemma facing retailers: that architectural interpretations of the ADA do not create the reasonable access that mobility-disabled shoppers actually desire. Despite this law, I propose that reasonable access depends heavily on a commitment by individual retailers to interpret the ADA in terms of consumer experience. Critical ethnography is used to uncover the multiple sides of this issue through the voices of retail students simulating disabilities, retail student teams accompanying disabled students, and retail managers discussing disabilities access. Analysis of these data exposes numerous contradictions between structural compliance and desired consumer access. Based on those contradictions, a Reasonable Access Framework is proposed that potentially could assist retailers in developing a code of reasonable access based on their own professional standards. Public policy implications are also presented.*

Disabled persons represent a significant proportion of society. The Census Bureau indicates that the number of disabled persons reported in 1994 was approximately 54 million, representing 21% of the entire United States population. Since 1990, retailers have been faced with the challenge of responding to the mandates of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The purpose of that act was to make the workplace and the marketplace accessible to those with limitations in their life abilities. As a result of ADA initiative, growing numbers of disabled persons now participate in the workforce and the marketplace using various mobility devices, transportation services, and special skills training.

Disabled persons and their consumer advocate groups indicate that barriers still exist in many store operations. Retailers also report contradictory perceptions and uneven understanding of the issues, attempting to balance a practical interpretation of the ADA with the development of strategies to sensitively deal with unintended shopping barriers (Stephens

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**Journal of Retailing**, Volume 75(4) pp. 479-508, ISSN: 0022-4359

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and Bergman, 1995). It is not clear whether there are major inadequacies in the law, whether key areas have been overlooked, or whether it is simply not possible for the law alone to legislate and enforce reasonable access, without addressing the costs and benefits to retailers.

ADA guidelines are general and often must be interpreted for a specific store format. Moreover, numerous types of disabilities can pose requests for accommodation related to specific disabilities (Reedy, 1993), creating unique blends of consumer needs and solutions. Ideally, retailers choose how to apply the ADA to their specific merchandise and store designs after carefully examining the activities that their actual and potential shoppers may want to undertake (Baraban, 1994; Brumback, 1994). In actuality, some retailers report concerns over encountering considerable expense that may not result in increased numbers of customers (Wilson, 1990).

Reasonable access is a vague notion. It seems to have been defined legislatively in terms of architectural standards rather than offering solutions to customer problems with respect to specific merchandise and store layouts. This gap is noted in disabilities access manuals that preface their lists of physical design requirements with a concern for balance among safety, public policy, and access (see *Recommendations for Accessibility Guidelines*, 1994).

The purpose of this article is to identify and investigate an apparent dilemma facing retailers: that technical acceptance of the ADA may not alone create the reasonable access that disabled shoppers actually desire. The argument centers on what is defined as reasonable access, whether it is (or can be) achieved under the law, and if not, how the law ought to be revised. The ADA may provide a legislative starting place for developing reasonable retail access for disabled shoppers without the "follow-through" to enable its implementation. Reasonable access may also depend on a commitment by individual retailers to interpret the ADA in terms of the exchange process desired by their customers.

My premise is that the ADA does not completely translate store-specific accessibility into an effective set of architectural regulations. The shopping accessibility may instead depend on an analysis of the intersection among disabled consumer experience, retailer practice, and the ADA in producing shopper satisfaction. To examine this premise, 6 goals are addressed in this article: 1) to investigate the retail environment from the perspective of the disabled shopper, 2) to identify gaps in the delivery of reasonable access within retail environments, 3) to consider these findings in relation to the ADA, 4) to assess retailer knowledge and understanding of the ADA in general and in terms of their own store environment, 5) to integrate these findings into a reasonable access framework based on a balance of ADA compliance and retailer interpretation, and 6) to provide public policy recommendations for enhancing access for the mobility-disabled persons. To provide a narrow but rich focus, the present study investigates the shopping activities of mobility-disabled persons. Their experiences are expected to be particularly illustrative of retail access problems. Critical ethnography is used to uncover the multiple sides of this issue by examining the voices of retail students simulating disabilities, teams of retail students accompanying disabled students, and retail managers discussing disabilities access (following Stern, 1998).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Retail design is impacted by many influences ranging from cost-minimization to the creation of a consumer experience. Moreover, designers must respond to numerous demands, such as zoning regulations, historic district provisions, and disabilities access requirements. Attempts to satisfy complex sets of stakeholders can place the individual firm in a position of conflict in which the needs of one group may directly oppose the needs of another. The service environment literature is useful in examining the intersections that can occur.

### **Creating the Servicescape: The Challenges of Deliberate Retail Design**

“Spatial aesthetics,” or atmospherics (Kotler, 1973), is the conscious design of space to create desired effects in buyers. Shoppers are assumed to “feel” and “experience” the store setting, the lights, the layout, the attitude of the personnel, the freshness, the scent, the music, and the temperature, all combining to create positive reactions and loyalties (see *Servicescapes*, edited by Sherry, 1998, for a thorough review). A store environment can encompass many dimensions, it can include a building or physical structure and all that is within it, such as ambient cues, aesthetic-design cues, functional-design cues, and social cues as elements (Baker, 1998).

The dimensions of physical surroundings have been studied in various retail contexts and diverse disciplines to understand their relationship with shopper behavior and image creation (see Bitner, 1992 for a review). A framework, proposed by Bitner (1992), integrates several theories and findings into a set of relationships among customers, employees, the environmental dimensions of the built environment. This holistic environment is designated as the perceived “servicescape.” Bitner argues that the physical setting is created and managed in deliberate ways to create desired individual responses and social interactions within the servicescape itself. Her framework integrates and broadens behavioral responses beyond approach and avoidance behaviors (Mehrabian and Russell, 1974) to include the cognitive, emotional, and physiological responses of both customers and employees to the holistic environment and its individual dimensions.

Subsequent studies have identified specific types of designs that create a theme or an experience, expanding a prior emphasis on functionality, efficiency, and prestige store and brand names (Gottdiener, 1998). Store environments can serve numerous deliberate purposes, such as providing informational value (Baker, 1998), creating an experience based on strong brand identity (Sherry, 1998), reconstructing a store to reflect customer and location change (Wallendorf, Lindsey-Mullikin, and Pimentel, 1998), developing stores as stages for participation (Creighton, 1998), or enhancing customer experience through employee neatness, appearance, and uniforms (Solomon, 1998). However, Baker (1987) cautioned that development of store environment should include both retailer and consumer perspectives since some attributes desired by a firm may conflict with customer preferences, such as temperature level or seating arrangements. Moreover, actual store objectives, such as speed of customer flow through the establishment, may be impeded

when the overall store is designed solely according to customer desires (see Baker, 1987 for detailed examples of design conflict). It is likely that the intersection of the ADA's architectural design mandates, the cost-effectiveness and experience-creation design plans of retailers, and the access design needs of mobility-disabled consumers have the potential to create similar conflicts for all parties.

### **Title III and Store Environment**

Title III of the ADA specifically considers reasonable access at public accommodations, such as restaurants, shopping centers, theaters, and museums. It was developed to address the retail obstacles related to disabled consumers' problems, lack of pleasure, and lack of perceived control, as identified by disabilities advocate groups. Their efforts culminated in an integrated attempt to legislate minimum access standards for a common set of atmospheric variables (see Lotito, Alvarez, and Pimentel, 1992 for a review). Many gaps related to physical, spatial, health, safety, and informational barriers were generalized across store types and codified into law. (Chanil, 1992; Cocheo, 1990; Denton, 1994; Forseter, 1993).

ADA regulations were written for general store attributes or prototypes. Thus, they established objectively measured standards, such as specific minimum widths of door openings or dimensions for sinks. As a result, the reported needs of the disabled were translated into specific proportions and locations of handicapped-accessible parking spaces, the design of entrances and exits, the modifications of "common" amenities such as restrooms and water fountains, and the design of checkout areas. In essence, the ADA required that retailers change aspects of their existing store design, or develop new designs, in order to be in compliance.

Several workbooks that have been written to assist businesses in applying the ADA to their specific situations. They suggest utilizing the concept of "continuous sequence" in tracing the experience of disabled persons (see Lotito, Alvarez, and Pimentel, 1992; Harrison and Gilbert, 1992 for examples). Rather than considering each environmental attribute or activity separately, continuous sequence includes the individual attributes plus the sequence of behaviors necessary in transitioning from one activity to the next. Management analysts have argued that many gaps in workplaces are found at these transition points (Baraban, 1994; Brumback, 1994). I argue that similar gaps occur in service environments and that the application of continuous sequence can be productive in developing accommodations for disabled shoppers.

### **Using Continuous Sequence within the Servicescape to Examine Reasonable Access**

In addition to perceptions of any specific attribute, shoppers are thought to perceive their shopping environments holistically (Bitner, 1992). Disabled shoppers in particular note gaps and smooth transitions in the continuous sequence, blending the parts

into the composite and creating a set of reactions. Because mobility-related problems are like a control gate to many shopping experiences, it is expected that negative experiences with individual features will create an overall negative reaction to the whole environment. Within the servicescape framework, the ambient conditions, spatial layout and functionality, and the signs/symbols/artifacts can each be examined for reasonable access and barrier creation in terms of architectural application of the ADA. Specific design elements can also be considered in terms of the retailer's and its employees' interpretations of the ADA.

Moreover, the servicescape framework can be used to analyze unsatisfactory encounters, such as incomplete shopping efforts, unpleasant interactions with salespersons, and failure of the service experience to meet expectations. Within those contexts, the researcher can determine all the dimensions of the servicescape that contributed to the problems experienced by mobility-disabled shoppers. It is proposed that examining the continuous sequence within a servicescape framework will provide a systematic, theoretical approach to identifying several types of gaps related to the ADA. In addition, it is anticipated that insights will emerge facilitating the management of the store environment in the creation of reasonable access.

Many stores select retail designs for the purpose of creating specific experiences and consumer reactions so as to enhance store profitability and market share. In contrast, the ADA requires the construction or reconstruction of the retail environment to achieve legal compliance. Laws framed in architectural terms may not serve retailer or client goals and hence introduce contradictions that discomfit everyone. Perhaps this is the heart of the dilemma. Laws that are imposed on a retailing system without understanding all the underlying dynamics are likely to become ineffective and difficult to implement.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS**

Traditional methods of study are not always appropriate whenever the examination of a phenomenon centers on capturing unfamiliar, subjective experiences in the field situation (Kaufman and Hernandez, 1991; Sherry, 1990; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989). The experience of being disabled is unfamiliar to many who are responsible for researching, planning, or executing aspects of retail layouts and designs. It is likely that there are limiting characteristics of the store atmosphere which go unobserved. They may be "masked" by the more generalizable set of problems that are noted by typical shoppers (Penaloza, 1998).

### **Looking Inside a Shared Subculture among Disabled Persons**

One approach considers disabled persons as a specific "subculture" within the larger group of nondisabled persons (Gould, 1997). The population of disabled persons has many characteristics of a subculture, sharing the experiential set of special medical care, reduced

conformance to in-group behavior, participation in remedial and special training classes, and the need to identify themselves as qualifying for specific types of consideration, when appropriate. The disabled can participate in many activities, but find it difficult to participate in others. Although they are thought to have similar consumer problems and goals as do nondisabled consumers, their challenges have created a set of artifacts (such as wheelchairs, crutches, Braille and large-print formats, and hearing aids) that are identifiable and shared among persons who experience comparable limitations. Similar to the study of a foreign culture or subculture, nondisabled researchers may not automatically "see" the problems of the disabled shopper, without ever having been "in their place" (Gould, 1998).

### **Enabling Retailers to Share Their Dilemmas**

It is also not clear how well retailers understand the ADA. Moreover, a method of study cannot fully examine retailer dilemmas by simply recording observations of barriers and apparent lack of compliance. Instead, the method must be able to encourage retailers to share their feelings about ADA policies. Similar to the disabled shopper, the retailer is thought to face a contradictory dilemma in designing or remodeling to create unproven benefits for disabled shoppers. Although contradictions are expected based on prior readings of trade industry literature, they have not been investigated in the context of a theoretically based systematic study.

### **Using the Power of Ethnography to Extract Rich Behavioral Perceptions**

Arnould (1998) suggests that ethnography is appropriate for in-depth analysis of the interactions found in service encounters. Moreover, the ethnographic approach is thought to be particularly appropriate when studying groups in their own settings, such as homeless shelters, or when studying shoppers' interactions within the context of marketplace settings, such as swap meets (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf, 1988; Hill, 1991; Hill and Stamey, 1990; McGrath, Sherry, and Heisley, 1993; Sherry, 1990; Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991). Given the need to capture the unspoken voices and actual issues confronting both disabled shoppers and retailers, ethnographic research was chosen to uncover how obstacles in the retail environment impact perceptions of stores, as well as the self-perceptions and lived worlds of the disabled. By employing a variety of interpretive methods, I anticipated that the "behavioral constellation" of disabled shoppers would become apparent in a blend of oral notes, videos, photographs, logs of experience and field notes, utilizing the flexibility of emergent design.

The exploration of the shopping process of the disabled suggests that naturalistic observations be used. Shopping roles have been found to emerge in field situations that may not otherwise be captured through studies relying solely on information gathered away from the retail setting (Otnes, Lowrey, and Kim, 1993). Participant observation is particularly appropriate since it enables the researcher to be immersed in the actual

situation and to experience actual group processes first-hand. It has successfully been used in shopping research (see McGrath, 1989; Sherry, 1990 for examples).

Based on the methods detailed in the studies cited above, a study design was developed in which research teams would participate in shopping situations by either simulating disabilities or accompanying disabled persons as they shopped, similar to methods used by some retailers and recommended by workbooks on the ADA. Participation by simulating disabilities, although admittedly temporary and fictional, can enable the individuals to "try out" disabilities to gain first-hand understanding. Participation as the companion of a disabled shopper is also appropriate for observing the natural behaviors, experiences, positive outcomes, and frustrations, sharing stories in the field setting.

Similar to the methods developed in other contextual studies (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991), teams of trained student observers were required to simulate and/or observe the experiences of disabled shoppers, while taking pictures and keeping field notes of their experiences. To gain insight into the lived experiences of the disabled shoppers, shopping trips and interviews were loosely structured (Thompson and Haytko, 1997).

### **THE THREE PHASES OF STUDY**

The three phases of study implemented an approach called "critical theory" (Murray and Ozanne, 1991). Basically, critical theory builds a systematic approach to study a specific social problem under question, incorporating the input of "all relevant parties" to the issue. The "intersubjective understanding" that results is dialectically compared to objective social structures and processes, such as the existing evaluative studies regarding the problem. An analysis of any observed contradictions can produce alternative approaches that help to resolve the problem. By using critical theory, my investigation was designed to gain an understanding of disabled consumers and to gather inputs from retailers regarding their success and frustrations with the ADA. The study also proposes to consider whether resolutions can emerge. The planned shopping trips were required to include store-to-store transitions, as well as nonshopping activities, such as stops for refreshments or restroom use.

The retail students, disabled students, and retail interviewees were promised anonymity in the reporting of the study. Student teams were designated by code name, and disabled students are described by pseudonym only. Retailers were identified by store type and student interviewer code. Although identities are given in team names and pseudonyms, all participants were real people with real feelings. Their voices and stories were noted in numerous media in order to allow for a rich picture to emerge. Details, participants, goals, and results of each phase are presented in the data table given in Table 1.

#### **Phase One: Simulation of Disabilities**

In 1996, teams of students in an upper-level retail marketing class at a major university in the Northeast were required to visualize and undertake a typical shopping trip that they

**TABLE 1**

**Data Table**

Phase of Study	Teams, methods, and store types	Goals and summary of data
<p>Phase One: Simulation Groups 11 students simulated mobility disabilities; identify problems or give praise for access</p>	<p>Simulation Stores visited by each team (total = 24)</p> <p><i>SimGroup 1:</i> wheelchair Discount chain/women's clothing/shoes/dollar/grocery</p> <p><i>SimGroup 2:</i> wheelchair Sports/dollar/electronics/home décor/2 supermarkets</p> <p><i>SimGroup 3:</i> crutches Fast-food/furniture/supermarket/clothing/librari</p> <p><i>SimGroup 4:</i> wheelchair, crutches Discount chain/supermarket/fast-food/department store</p> <p><i>SimGroup 5:</i> wheelchair, crutches, motorized cart 2 discount chains/supermarket/pharmacy</p>	<p>Goal: what will nondisabled persons identify when simulating disabilities? Data: 5 summary reports, totaling 51 pages of text, plus appendices of student team observations and field notes, 51 still photographs and 1 in-store video</p>
<p>Phase Two: Retail Interviews 11 students from Phase 1 conducted 2 retailer interviews each yielding 22 interviews with retail managers at matched store pairs (local and regional or national for comparison)</p>	<p>Student Store Types</p> <p><i>Student A:</i> National fast-food chain and local video store <i>Student B:</i> Discount chain pharmacy and local pharmacy <i>Student C:</i> Regional chain video store and local video store <i>Student D:</i> National chain video store and local video store <i>Student E:</i> Regional home electronics store and local home electronics store <i>Student F:</i> Regional restaurant chain and local deli <i>Student G:</i> Regional convenience store and local grocery store <i>Student H:</i> Regional supermarket chain and local health food <i>Student I:</i> National chain women's apparel store and local women's apparel store <i>Student J:</i> Regional chain supermarket and local grocery store <i>Student K:</i> Regional convenience store and local convenience store</p>	<p>Goal: what will retailers report as their specific knowledge of the ADA? Goal: what types of accommodations are found within each retail store type? Goal: what strategies will retailers report implementing in assisting disabled persons? Data: 22 completed surveys and observational records of each store 11 summary reports, integrating on-site observation with survey responses</p>
<p>Phase Three: Disability Groups Students accompanied disabled students on a typical shopping trip; noted problems and positives</p>	<p>Team and Disabled Informant—Observations on shopping malls, stores, and problems <i>DisGroup 1:</i> Peggy, 32, paralysis from the waist down, auto accident at 23, uses wheelchair <i>DisGroup 2:</i> Noreen, 30's, Cerebral Palsy, uses crutches or wheelchair <i>DisGroup 3:</i> Cathy, 24, Epilepsy from head injuries in auto accident at age 21; no mobility aid used, does not "appear" disabled; reports mobility problems, fatigue, and light sensitivity <i>DisGroup 4:</i> Don, 30's, Chronic back pain and spasms from auto accident; no mobility aid used, does not "appear" disabled; reports mobility problems and fatigue</p>	<p>Goal: what will disabled persons identify on a typical shopping trip? What are their perceptions in general? Data: 4 summary reports, totaling 42 pages of text, plus appendices of student team observations, and field notes, and comments from 4 disabled students 24 still photographs 1 video interview—student with epilepsy</p>

would plan as part of their routine activities. The only requirement was that the trip should include at least 4 stores, including a grocery, and at least one customer service, such as a restroom, water fountain, or phone booth. Each student had to play the role of either a disabled shopper or the companion to the disabled shopper on a shopping trip, switching roles throughout the exercise. The students were required to simulate a mobility disability, by using a wheelchair, motorized cart, leg brace, or crutches.

Before conducting their field observations, the students participated in a training class on ethnographic research. As they discussed discrepancies from their usual nondisabled experience, they were asked to note, photograph, or otherwise record both good accommodations and instances when problems occurred. They were encouraged to keep a detailed log of their feelings, frustrations, accomplishments, and so forth, as if the shopping trip were a real necessity and as if the impairment that they were simulating were actually factual.

### **Phase Two: Retailer Interviews and Surveys**

The 11 students who had participated in the 1996 simulation exercise further conducted interviews with 22 retailers using a fixed set of open-ended questions plus a checklist of disabilities accommodations. They were required to contact one national or regional chain and one local store within the same industry, to vary observations across store size and capacity. This second phase of the study attempted 1) to assess ADA knowledge and understanding by a sample of retailers, 2) to identify their problems implementing the ADA, 3) to gain insight into their approaches to providing reasonable access, and 4) to identify some of the reasons why retailers decide not to adapt their store environment consistent with the expectations of the ADA. The data are composed of the interviews with retailers, the student observations in each store, and the student reports comparing and contrasting the local and regional/national retailers regarding ADA compliance (see Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998, for a practitioner-oriented analysis of solutions offered by the retailers).

### **Phase Three: Observations with Disabled Shoppers**

The third phase, conducted in 1997 broadened the perceptual data by recruiting a sample of disabled students, each of whom were assigned to a team of retail students. The Office of Student Affairs at the author's university was contacted on the purpose of the study. The Coordinator for Disabled Students screened and recruited four disabled students who were subsequently interviewed, briefed, and counseled regarding the purposes of the study. Teams of disabled and nondisabled students were then formed to 1) accompany their respondent on a shopping trip that the respondent would typically undertake, 2) capture their observations of real problems in field notes, pictures, tape-recorded observations, sketches, and so forth, and 3) prepare a written summary which detailed their findings.

## EMERGENT THEMES: A MIXED PICTURE OF REASONABLE ACCESS

The 3 phases of study resulted in a diverse, multimedia information database, indicating satisfaction, dissatisfaction, confusion, and lack of understanding. The format, media, and level of detail were chosen by the students and informants to represent their own experiential realities (Wallendorf and Arnould, 1991; Thompson, Locander, and Pollio, 1989). The multiple approaches, sites, and perspectives of the informants follow the triangulation approach recommended for this type of investigation (Hill and Stamey, 1990; Wallendorf and Belk, 1989).

The analysis of the written summaries, field notes, appendices, and interview transcripts were undertaken by using an iterative, part-to-whole reading strategy, similar to that used by Thompson and Haytko, (1997). As each part of the data was examined, it was analyzed for specific codes and categories that repeated information captured in prior data, adopting a constant comparative method (Manning, Bearden, and Rose, 1998). Inspection of the data focused on the identification of common patterns of experience among the students and retail informants, and common areas of concern by retailers. Common respondent terms were coded and recorded, to try to build a vocabulary for analyzing the disabled shoppers' experiences.

The 3 phases of study were also examined to determine if a story were emerging at the intersection of the observations from all the informants. Several recurrent themes emerged throughout the shopping process, which indicated a dialectical interplay between the structural compliance issues imposed by the ADA and the experiential, feelings-based access issues that formed a complementary part of the picture. Store environments that were consistently accessible emerged as favorites, whereas stores with unexpected barriers led to strong negative perceptions. In addition, having to ask for help was viewed as a negative by the disabled informants, in contrast to the retailers, who appeared to view "readiness to help when asked" as a method of accommodation. The sequence of studies identified 8 points where obstacles and shopping transitions are likely to occur, where predictability is needed and consumer access is expected. These points are used to organize the findings of the phases of study. They are overall store access, availability of accommodative equipment, mobility in store settings, customer information and display accessibility, merchandise trialability, customer service access, transaction access, and store personnel interaction.

### Overall Store Access: Welcoming and Unwelcoming Messages

Most of the interviews and summaries began where shoppers often do; in a parking lot or outside of a store, in anticipation of beginning their shopping experience. Disabled shoppers are presented with a mixture of accommodations and barriers, creating welcoming and unwelcoming messages. Because of the disparities in store settings, disabled persons report avoiding stores where they have had negative or surprising experiences, whereas developing loyalties to "safe" and predictable environments, and often checking things out in advance:

Noreen [who has Cerebral Palsy] routinely takes “dry-runs” with a friend to “check out parking, steps, walking distances, etc.” Although she gets help from her friends, she sums up her shopping trips as “embarrassing and frustrating.” Noreen currently walks with the aid of crutches, but is prone to fatigue if she is on her feet for too long (DisGroup 2).

The ADA offers advice to retailers regarding placement and design of handicapped parking spaces, ramps, doors, and other types of structures. Workbook advice on creating the “pathway into the store” is often given in separate informational blocks, such as a section on the required number of parking spaces and a separate section on access ramps. Problems emerged, however, when access was considered as part of a person’s entire pathway, or continuous sequence. The retailers reported using some judgment in determining “reasonable” and “reasonable enough” access, in attempting to minimize expenses, while maintaining service to store customers. Retailers seemed to define accessibility as being ready to react to shopper problems. Disabled shoppers wanted potential problems to be identified in advance and solved so that there were no surprises and no need to ask for help:

Student D researched two video stores. The owner of the local store reported “that the ramp near that handicap space is very steep and that people in wheelchairs really can’t get up the ramp without help. If a person in a wheelchair is alone, they usually go down 3 stores where there is another ramp that is a little easier to tackle. The doors . . . are not automatic, but they are large enough to get through and somebody in the store will always run out to hold the door open if needed . . . the owner of the national chain store indicated that “he was very familiar with the ADA . . . there is literature that is sent from headquarters . . . most is aimed at avoiding lawsuits . . . there was also a handicap space right near the door along with an accessible curb right near it.

Descriptions of parking lots and entrance combinations revealed a mixed picture of accessibility. A route from one’s car or into a store might be technically accessible but not pleasant to maneuver. For instance, some parking lots had an adequate number of handicapped spaces, but the condition of the parking lot surface itself was not satisfactory. One specific parking lot formed a barrier through its uneven surfaces and many small holes that could hinder crutches, canes, and wheelchairs. Some stores had individual store doors that seemed to comply, yet several instances of door combinations were found that were not passable in a wheelchair due to the angle of the door sequence. In addition, the dexterity and strength required to manipulate a door plus wheelchair may combine to form a set of tasks that are difficult. All of these situations could make a mobility-disabled shopper get “stuck” on their way to and from stores, having the potential to create embarrassment and potential danger, as follows:

Three stores did not have automatic doors for challenged shoppers . . . the doors were heavy and without a companion, there would be no way a person in a wheelchair could

enter . . . the person in the wheelchair had to be pulled backwards into the store. This is similar to a parent pulling a child's stroller through a store door (SimGroup 1).

We had no problem entering the chain discount store. The pavement and concrete were completely flush at the entire entrance and exit . . . The entrance [to the major fast-food chain] was horrible . . . the handicapped parking spaces are at the bottom of the hill . . . Once up the hill, customers have to open a very heavy door (SimGroup 4).

The latter narrative suggests that the slope of a ramp combined with the heaviness of a wheelchair was daunting. The perceived servicescape became a mix of barriers and difficulties. The combination of access activities could potentially be physically taxing or dangerous, even though the individual parts of the sequence, the ramp and the door, may meet literal compliance with the ADA. Similar problems were found by the disabled shopper teams, which encountered more encompassing examples of obstacles:

Peggy, who always uses a wheelchair, was unable to enter the electronics store due to the alarm system and the advertisement display located directly in front of the doors. . . . In contrast, [a young women's national apparel chain] was a good example of a store that is sufficiently handicap accessible. The exterior of the store has no obstructions . . . the store layout is very spacious (DisGroup 1).

### **Availability of Accommodative Equipment: Providing the Kinetic Dimension in Retail Space**

People with disabilities indicate that they want to feel like "normal, average" persons. That wish extends to the shopping environment. However, persons with mobility disabilities are not really the same. Realistically, they have problems moving through the certain aspects of the servicescape. To "level the playing field," some accommodations or services are often identified and planned into the retail design in advance.

The disabled participants stressed that persons with mobility disabilities frequently want to borrow wheelchairs or motorized carts provided by at the retail site. Some shopping malls, individual stores, and other service providers, such as amusement parks, routinely advertise and supply them. However, Noreen, Peggy, and the student groups noted that supplying the items also included making them easily obtainable and providing the equipment in good working order:

Although Noreen uses the wheelchair for long shopping trips, we were surprised to discover that in the entire length of the mall, there is only one area the challenged shopper can get this necessity. One of Noreen's concerns is the lack of options available to the challenged shopper when wheelchairs are not accessible, which Noreen says is a common occurrence (DisGroup 2).

All the teams found a wide variety of equipment as they went from store to store. The equipment varied in condition, usefulness for shopping, instructions for use, and location in the store. Sometimes, the “right” equipment was available, but it was difficult to obtain or far away from the shoppers’ entrance, or it was broken or dirty. In other instances, the equipment provided was difficult to use in the specific store environment, because it was too large, too heavy, or too difficult to use:

I had never operated [a motorized wheel cart] before. I was able to see the large, clearly written directions displayed on the cart . . . the cart was easy to maneuver and was very comfortable . . . we came across another handicapped woman using the same type of cart . . . she expressed to us . . . how comfortable she felt and that [the major discount chain] is one of the only stores that she feels that she can come to and perform shopping as a normal person . . . [In the regional supermarket], we noticed that there was only one motorized cart, and it was almost impossible to use. It was blocked in by the front entrance doors (SimGroup 5).

The teams also found great discrepancies in their abilities to obtain a mobility aid that they could easily begin to use upon entering a store. Some stores tended to place their mobility aids in corners, customer service areas, and other “dead” spots. The distinction seemed to pivot on whether the mobility aids were located for the convenience of the disabled customers or for the convenience of the retailer. When the mobility aids could be retrieved and borrowed, the student teams identified other issues that could interfere with their ability to shop. First, the condition of the mobility aids varied dramatically; some were covered with dust, dirt, and other debris.

We also noticed that the wheelchair I was using was broken . . . my hand kept getting caught in the spokes, my hand and coat got filthy dirty from constant contact with the wheel . . . [At another major discount chain], the motorized cart had a basket in the front and the regular one (wheelchair) did not . . . [when I used the wheelchair], I would either have to keep the things that I was purchasing on my lap without dropping them as I maneuvered around or try and push a cart at the same time in front or along side (SimGroup 5).

A major theme that emerged was the contrast between unpleasant surprise and predictable options. Shoppers form habits in terms of repeated behaviors that simplify their shopping trips. Retailers in turn vie for store loyalties in attempting to be included in the shoppers’ consideration set of routinely shopped stores. When disabled shoppers are concerned, it seems that habits are formed by repeated patterns of access and predictability. Servicescape planning and design that promised mobility-disabled shoppers clean, usable mobility aids at places convenient to the customer were likely to create a positive response, loyalty to the store or center, and the motivation to return at another time.

On a larger scale, inspection of coordination between malls and individual stores revealed contradictions in access. One mall provided easy-access ATM machines, benches, elevators, and motorized carts, yet one team noted many stores in the same

mall that provided poor access. Another student team found that one mall's elevator was out of service for several weeks, preventing mobility-disabled shoppers with full and predictable access to all mall levels. Such findings were common according to the disabled informants.

### **Mobility in Store Settings: Planned Customer Movement through Store Space**

Retailers generally attempt to utilize their floor space profitably, with an optimal blend of selling area, aisles, and customer space. Selling floors and stairs were used in widely different ways in providing access to all merchandise. Many stores placed items in the aisles themselves, or conducted inventory during shopping hours, with unattended ladders and carts left blocking the pathways through the stores. Because of such conditions, moving through aisles and "turning around" were be impossible because of the narrowness of the aisle and store clutter:

In the kitchenwares store, one of the problems facing Noreen was difficulty in turning and looking at merchandise without crashing into the numerous displays that were placed very close to one another . . . the stock actually blocked her way, and prevented her from looking at all the items that the store offered (DisGroup 2).

The aisles [in a national bookstore chain] were lined with books along the floor which would not allow the width of a wheelchair to pass through. Peggy commented: "The problems I usually run into in shopping are aisles that are too narrow, boxes in the aisles, and racks and displays that are too close for me to get through, and my wheel chair is more narrow than most" (DisGroup 1).

Store layout and inventory replenishment are parts of the servicescape that are of particular concern to the mobility-disabled shopper, who may need more space in store aisles than does the typical person. However, in designing the servicescape, the retailer may need to use space efficiently and choose to provide narrow aisles. Moreover, the retail planner may construct dramatic layouts in creating certain atmospheres, by using multiple levels, stairs, and balconies. Literal ADA compliance can appear to contradict the retailer's design decisions, while the retail store design and space use can prevent mobility-disabled customers from shopping effectively. Some retailers emphasized the ADA's typical architectural approach, whereas others seemed to emphasize customers' needs from a marketing point of view:

The manager of [the regional convenience store chain] . . . touched on the technical aspects of the Disabilities Act . . . he said that there needed to be exactly 42 inches in the width of the aisles and he mentioned the degree of slope on the access ramps . . . [the local grocery owner] described a more personal view of the Americans with Disabilities Act . . . she told me that in a couple of years, she might need a walker and

that she would hope that she could have easy access into all the stores that she currently shops at on a regular basis. (Student G—retail interview)

## **Display Accessibility**

The purpose of displays is to allow shoppers to view, inspect, and examine merchandise, allowing them to gain needed information prior to purchase. Displays also allow the shopper to gather specific items for trial or purchase. One disabled informant reported worrying about breakage of delicate items. She refrained from inspecting them, even though she wanted to make a purchase. Another noted that parts of displays, such as long tablecloths, can become caught on crutches or wheelchairs, posing a potential hazard to the shopper.

The students' findings considered display from multiple perspectives of doing what a typical consumer would want to do in making a purchase: examination of merchandise with one's hands, evaluation of merchandise through mirrors, ability to measure merchandise, and ability to retrieve merchandise from a display. Disabled shoppers in both groups were unable to reach the actual merchandise in some displays. A cosmetics display, emphasizing color choice, was only partially accessible, because the level of the mirror was completely over the student's head as she sat in her wheelchair. Numerous other displays that relied on customer self-evaluation presented similar problems, such as a display of sunglasses with a mirror at about a five-foot height. In other stores, comparable sunglasses displays provided vertical mirrors at several heights, eliminating the problem. Many retailers seemed to enable disabled shoppers to travel toward their displays, without facilitating actual use of the display:

Both the pharmacy in the national discount chain and the local pharmacy reported that their challenged customers have some difficulty shopping in their stores such as reaching certain items . . . the pharmacy in the chain store had motorized carts, walkers, and wheelchairs . . . both had automatic doors and handicapped parking (Student B—retail interview).

Although displays provide suggested opportunities to examine merchandise, sometimes such information is only partially available to the disabled shopper; moreover, the display design may present obstacles to purchase. For instance, another student team found vending machines with coin slots too high to reach, produce with unreachable scales and unobtainable plastic bags, and limited visibility at deli counters. In addition, displays stacked too high or too low can present safety problems when products can only be pulled from the bottom of the stack.

Some attributes of displays and general store interiors that are otherwise popular and acceptable can actually pose significant hazards to persons with specific disabilities. Lighting is a case in point. Shoppers with epilepsy, for instance, are not generally apparent to retail personnel, but may be sensitive to certain types of lighting. The disabled

informant Cathy had to avoid retail places that use such lighting as part of their environment, without warning:

Cathy also has problems with bright flashes of light in nightclubs and movie theaters. Strobe lights or a bright flash of light in a dark room can trigger seizures . . . this is known as photosensitivity . . . one time, Cathy had a seizure at a night club because of the strobe lights. Both her friends and the employees did not know she was having a seizure. They simply thought she was drunk (DisGroup 3).

### Merchandise Trialability

Consumers often want to examine and try merchandise in making their decisions. The student simulation teams, who tried to carry out actual shopping, found problems in reaching merchandise placed overhead and merchandise placed into containers such as freezers. The added freezer doors, for instance, were occasionally difficult to open. The ability to bend over into "bin"-type freezers seemed based on the assumption that the consumer was able to stand. In addition, items that are displayed on vertical racks, such as self-serve shoe stores, were difficult to access. Rack displays presented some difficulties, depending on the design of the hook. Some retailers had compensated by providing added space to maneuver:

In the [consumer electronics store] . . . there was even leg room provided under the shelves where the computers were located . . . we were even able to open refrigerator doors while sitting in the wheelchair. [In the supermarket], our biggest problem was reaching in the freezers. We didn't have access to the top shelves plus the freezer door would slam into the wheelchair (SimGroup 2).

The disabled informants also commented that fitting rooms can be difficult to reach and difficult to use because they were often located on the perimeter of the store layout. The routes to those areas were often narrow hallways filled with merchandise, requiring difficult maneuvering. When size of doorway, aisle, or fitting room is small, the possibility of getting stuck in the fitting room arises. Noreen and Peggy emphasized that this fear was a reality. Being caught in an area with little access to help was a common theme mentioned in disabled support groups.

An important contrast emerges when both retailer and disabled shopper perceptions are considered. Some retailers viewed "maneuvering" as normal shopping behavior by the disabled. The retailers in the sample did not mention customer fear or discomfort. The disabled informants, however, reported feeling uneasy and often fearful when they had to maneuver through a store:

To get to these fitting rooms, you must travel down a narrow aisle to enter the actual fitting room. Due to the width of the aisle, we could not turn the wheel chair to get into

the room. Even if we could turn the wheelchair, the fitting room was so small the chair would not fit through the door . . . The fitting room had a few boxes and some other things in it (SimGroup 2).

The manager [of a national women's apparel chain] was not even familiar with the ADA . . . she states that disabled customers do not have any trouble maneuvering throughout the store . . . sales associates will help . . . the only specially designated area for disabled shoppers is a very large dressing room . . . the owner of the local apparel store was vaguely familiar with the ADA. (Student I—retail interview)

The actual purpose of the fitting rooms was occasionally defeated by design or storage use. In some cases, trying on clothing was a complete impossibility, because there was no room for the shopper to ease out of the wheelchair onto the seat, clothes hooks were placed overhead, and the wheelchair was unable to be turned around for exit. In addition, student groups found the handicapped fitting rooms used as an impromptu storage bins, filled with merchandise and inaccessible because of the clutter inside.

Another student group found just the opposite in one national discounter's fitting room. The handicapped-accessible fitting room was well-marked, provided a easily reachable button for requesting assistance, was designed with a wide swinging door, and was wide enough inside for ease of turning around. The students reported that the motorized cart could actually fit inside the fitting room, and because it could be backed out, presented no serious problems to the users.

The disabled informants reported that they were often embarrassed to undertake consumer activities that called attention to their disabilities, such as trying on clothing in a store fitting room. Two of the informants mentioned that they preferred to try items on in the privacy of their own homes, even though it meant a return trip if the item was not satisfactory. Peggy noted that she has found store managers to be uncomfortable in allowing her to take bathing suits home for trial; however, trial at home was her only option, given her physical limitations.

Noreen does not even attempt to try on her clothes in the stores' dressing rooms before purchasing . . . she has no choice but to try her clothing on at her home. If they do not fit, she is forced to make the long and often tedious trip back to the store (DisGroup 2).

## **Obstacles in Customer Services**

Throughout the course of their shopping trips, the research teams found that disabled shoppers are often unable to use common service amenities such as water fountains, rest rooms, telephones, and ATM machines. In many cases, although the appropriate mix of services were provided, minor details or oversights rendered them as unfriendly to the disabled shopper. The changes that were needed were not necessarily part of the architectural issues covered by the ADA. Instead, they were choices made by the retailer

regarding height, width, or location of the service. For instance, some restrooms did not allow a wheelchair to pass through the door, whereas others allowed the wheelchair user to enter, but not to use all the parts of the "restroom sequence." One student group photographed a restroom's typical array of changing table, disposable diapers, sanitary products, and paper towels. Ironically, the most commonly used item, paper towels, were unreachable for the shopper in a wheelchair. Many other stores had placed towel dispensers at varied heights. Although the access to the towels was improved, a need to walk to get the towels, however, increased the potential for a fall. Wet floors, according to Noreen, were particularly dangerous in these circumstances.

The restroom facilities were also very bad. The door that needed to be opened in order to enter the restroom was very heavy. The handicapped stall was only a few inches larger than the regular stall . . . The sink was set up with a cabinet underneath. A wheelchair could not fit under the sink and unless the disabled person had unusually long arms, they would not even be able to wash their hands (SimGroup 4).

Although most stores provided shopper amenities, some stores located them a substantial distance away from the main floor area, often at the convenience of the retailer. In essence, it seemed that retail planners had assumed that all shoppers could plan their rest and nonshopping activities as choices scheduled between discrete shopping activities. Such locations presented a problem for mobility-disabled shoppers, who are likely to be limited in strength and endurance. Each informant indicated that fatigue was a predictable part of his or her shopping experience. However, fatigue often occurred at unpredictable times throughout their trip. They suggested that shopper lounges and rest areas were often too far from the merchandise locations. Their critical need was to rest while inspecting merchandise, rather than after that task was completed.

Noreen gave this description: "My challenge is walking long distances, standing for long periods of time and being on my feet consistently for a period of 2 to 3 hours. Due to my Cerebral Palsy, which causes me to use crutches, long periods on my feet cause severe pain and stiffness, making it difficult to walk." The fact that she has to use the crutches makes it cumbersome for her to carry bags or merchandise from one place to the next (DisGroup 2).

The struggles with compliance versus cost-effectiveness surfaced frequently in the retailer interviews. Retailers were aware of many problems faced by disabled shoppers, yet only some managers reported methods of assisting them:

The local manager [of a local grocery store] observed that disabled shoppers have a hard time 'squeezing through the aisles.' [in contrast] . . . The regional supermarket has special restrooms, extra wide aisles and checkouts, and special parking spots . . . employees also learn to keep aisles and side walkways clear . . . regional chain retailers have the resources to make adjustments to their store layout . . . locally-owned

retailers feel that the ADA adds to their overall expenses . . . the cost of adjusting their store layout does not seem like a profitable investment . . . inexpensive ways [can be used such as] training, . . . taking into consideration display location and height, keeping aisles free of obstacles . . . (Student J—retail interview).

### **Transaction Access**

Similar themes emerged regarding access for transactions; some stores were lauded for positioning their countertops at convenient heights for all consumers, whereas others were noted for overlooking barriers in parts of the process. One group noted an ATM with an accessible keypad and a screen that could not be seen by a person in a wheelchair. Others found that height of counters provided unexpected barriers:

The biggest problem that we ran into was the deli counter [at a large, regional supermarket chain]. This counter is very high and it took a while before the student [on crutches] was even noticed. Considering the amount of time that it took before she was noticed, we could not imagine the frustration a person in a wheelchair experiences from waiting (SimGroup 4).

Other stores took a proactive role in planning transaction access in the servicescape:

Student E researched two home electronics stores, a regional chain and a locally owned retailer. He found that “the manager [of the regional chain] told how he played a role in the construction of the store, and made sure the building conformed to certain codes . . . bathrooms . . . entrance to the store . . . width of aisles and display heights . . . were made to cater to customers of all kinds (Student E—retail interview).

### **Store Personnel Interaction**

The students reported that the disabled shoppers clearly wanted to be treated as average customers. Both the simulation teams and the disabled shopper teams found contrasting reactions from store employees. In some stores, disabled customers were ignored, whereas in other stores, the store employee tried to do too much for the disabled customer in a patronizing way. Other retailers, especially those who provided training for their employees, responded simply, appropriately and with respect. The research teams reported several instances of averted eye contact in a national shoe store. Others reported that store employees spoke to the disabled shoppers’ companions, rather than speaking directly to the disabled shopper. Similar lack of attention to payment and bagging procedures were also noted at checkout. The contrasts in store responses can be found in both the customer and retailer experiences:

In a few of the stores we entered, Noreen's request for help was met by an immediate and positive response . . . when we went into the record store, each member of our group was asked if they needed help . . . When Noreen asked a question, the salesperson answered to a group member instead of directly to Noreen (DisGroup 2).

Neither of the [electronics] stores had any formal training about how to more effectively cater to customers with special needs . . . the local manager responded: 'we're not doctors; my guys are salesmen here' . . . [both managers encouraged the employees to] treat the customers well . . . If a disabled person needed special help, [the regional manager] was confident that his salespeople would be able to provide a good service (Student E—retail interview).

Bitner's framework clearly indicates that social interactions between customers and employees are influenced by the servicescape. The physical design defines the range of possible behaviors for customers and employees alike. When mobility-disabled customers are limited in some part of the shopping experience, positive interactions can be enhanced through training, comfort level of the employee, and approach defined by the retailer.

### **Architectural versus Experiential Compliance: An Example in Layout Design**

Some store environments that use split-level layouts are partially accessible to disabled customers. The disabled students suggested that retailers should evaluate whether their design has eliminated behaviors that are desired by customers, or whether access to the additional store levels are more directly related to the creation of a shopping atmosphere for all shoppers:

. . . on a prior occasion, when she was shopping with her wheelchair-bound friend, Sue, they had asked a salesperson to bring down some items from the upper level of the store. Noreen and Sue were unable to choose their own items because the salesperson gave them a choice of what she had brought down for them (DisGroup 2).

The substantive issue in this example is access to the merchandise, rather than the removal or modification of the stairs, which is only one possible solution. In instances like this, the retailer has several alternatives in managing the elements of the servicescape that may moderate the problem posed by the stairs. The retailer can consider the impact of any change on the physical environment's roles as desired visual metaphor, as facilitator of desired behaviors, and as differentiator in signaling the firm's positioning (Bitner, 1992). For instance, if practical, the retailer may be able to install a ramp or elevator. However, if such architectural designs are not affordable, or clash with the visual metaphor, the retailer can also "create" access by directing employees to bring merchandise to the customer for their evaluation, whereas maintaining the customer's feelings of independence and control. Finally, the upper level may solely be used to create a desired mood

or image, with exact duplication of merchandise on each level. In that case, the disabled shopper is not strictly prevented from examining the whole merchandise mix.

In the actual case example, Noreen and Sue were dissatisfied with the salesperson's service. The stairs effectively barred them from examining all the merchandise by themselves and making their "own" choices. In addressing that need, a retailer can also provide comprehensive training for salespersons, catalogs, computer kiosks, and Web sites that can create "virtual" access to the merchandise. In essence, the disabled customer is likely to desire access to the full assortment of merchandise. Physically going to another store level may or may not actually be an inconsequential detail. Effective reasonable access appears to be captured in whether the customer perceives that they are able to access and/or examine the full line of products, not strictly whether multiple levels are able to be encountered. Ironically, such an approach may actually place the well-intentioned retailer in strict violation of the ADA's architectural requirements, even if shopper "access" is achieved. Conversely, some architectural changes thought to be in compliance with the ADA have been found to deny accessibility to disabled persons; (see "ADA a No-Brainer?" 1998 for a field study description). Such additional dilemmas sorely need public policy attention and investigation.

## **DISCUSSION: DEVELOPING A REASONABLE ACCESS FRAMEWORK**

Numerous contradictions between structural compliance and consumer experience emerged through the dialogues with research teams, disabled informants, and retailers. Although society has attempted to ensure that all customers' needs are served, the legal frame has apparently failed to meet its objectives through consistent delivery of reasonable access. Instead, social damage was found in the embarrassment and frustration of some disabled shoppers and their companions who were often blocked from participation in various servicescapes.

Although the findings are what the enlightened reader might expect, the reasons are more complex than might seem at first glance. Many studies of ADA effectiveness cite case examples of access problems. However, they lack a holistic picture joining the insights of designers, legislators, retail managers, and disabled customers. Based on these findings, I propose 3 conclusions: 1) reasonable access can be achieved by including the continuous sequence in identifying potential conflicts within servicescape designs; 2) access problems can be inadvertently created by misunderstanding the actual needs, feelings, and experiences of mobility-disabled persons; and 3) access problems are also related to an apparent over-reliance on ADA architectural guidelines without a parallel consideration of the consumer experience in a specific store environment.

### **Dialectical Analysis: Using the Contradictions to Develop a Framework**

Figure 1 presents a Reasonable Access Framework that can be used to identify contradictions between architectural compliance and actual experience. The diagram is

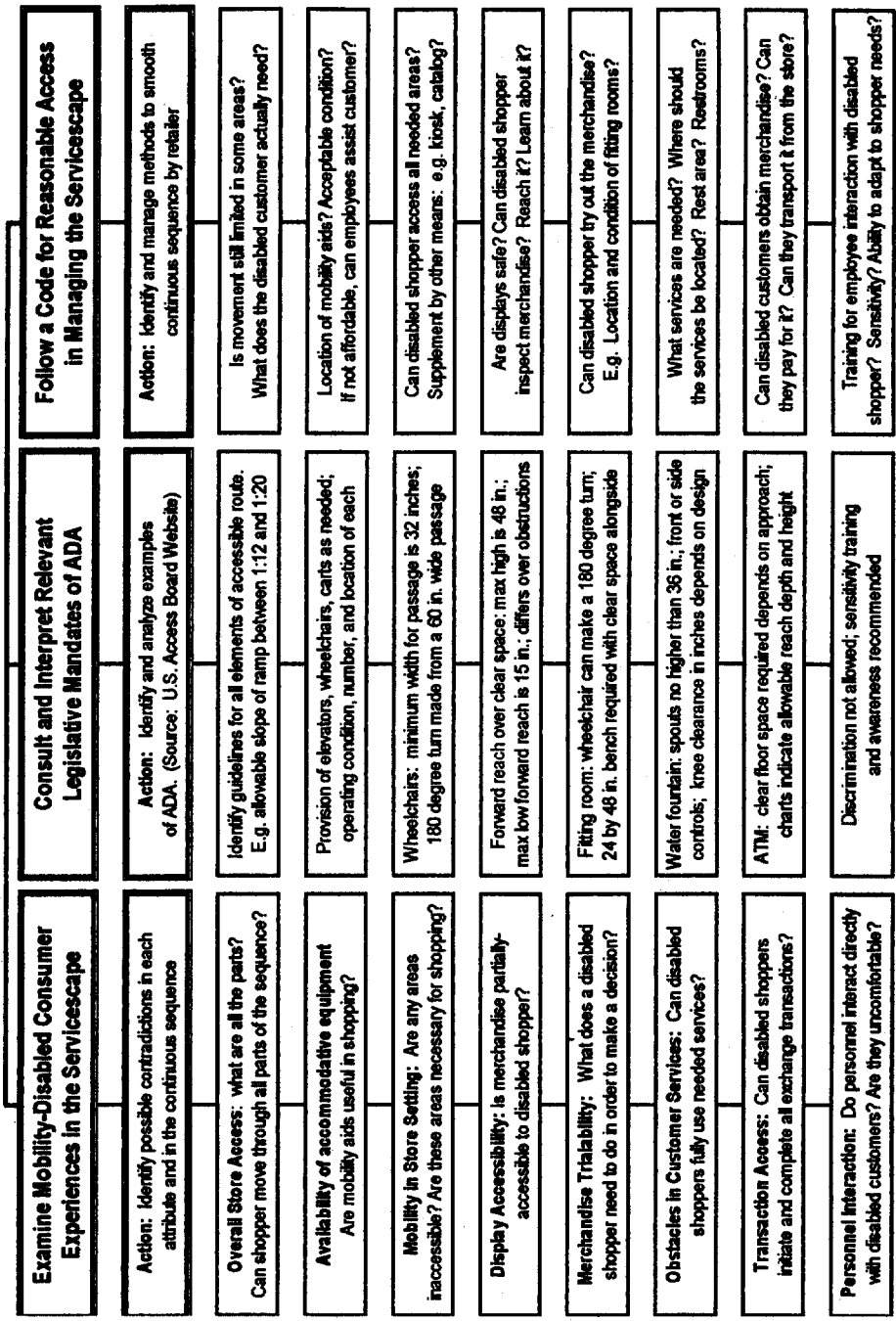


FIGURE 1

Contradictions between Compliance and Experience in the Continuous Sequence: Developing a Reasonable Access Framework

made of 3 major columns, moving from left to right, as follows: 1) the 8 access items identified as part of the continuous sequence of shopping; 2) examples of ADA legislation that illustrate the structural compliance for each issue (see U. S. Access Board Website, 1999 for specific measurement guidelines); and 3) a suggested code of deliberate service-escape management issues that could assist the caring retailer in systematically determining whether reasonable access has been achieved or whether further work is needed.

In the absence of ADA directives linked to their specific store environments, retailers may develop their own store-specific code of reasonable access. Working across Figure 1, they could first examine mobility-disabled consumer experiences in their own servicescape, looking for contradictions in the store attributes and the continuous sequence pertaining to each of the 8 access items. The retailers could then consult and interpret ADA guidelines that pertain to each access item, determining whether they have achieved architectural compliance. For instance, they could determine if their aisles, ramps, and customer service areas fall within acceptable ranges of size, height, and width for comfortable passage.

However, compliance in architectural terms may create store environments that are technically accessible without being operationally accessible. Concerned retailers could also evaluate the mobility-disabled shopper's potential experience in the servicescape to determine whether a smooth and satisfactory continuous sequence really exists. The ADA is a starting place based on generalized architectural measures. It cannot guarantee that disabled shoppers can perform all the activities that they need and want. It cannot guarantee their comfort.

### **Understanding and Defining Reasonable Access using the Dialogues**

The voices of actual disabled shoppers should be added to the ADA mandates in suggesting an operational definition of reasonable access in specific types of store environments. Reasonable access is related to the disabled person's state of mind as well as to their physical surroundings. It reflects the perception on the part of the disabled shopper that they can be self-sufficient and accomplish their shopping needs with a minimum amount of stress and embarrassment. Such a definition is clearly related to the creation of a barrier-free servicescape that allows the disabled person to participate in the store environment. What is meant by participation, however, is partially dependent on what disabled shoppers think and feel, whether they are afraid of getting stuck, or whether they can proceed with the confidence typical of nondisabled persons. Although such feelings are related to architectural standards, they are also related to the proactive interest and insightful approach taken by specific retailers.

Throughout these studies and the author's numerous discussions with disabled persons and their support groups, it is striking to note the contrasting themes of independence and "fear of becoming stuck." Understanding this contrast can add to the retailers' knowledge of reasonable access. For instance, retailers know that unexpected things happen: elevators break, inventory arrives during shopping hours, and floors get wet when it rains. However, knowing that such occurrences are critically distressing to mobility-disabled shoppers

provides a key to understanding the proactive approach that disabled persons desire. Unexpected hazards are likely to happen whether or not a store strictly conforms to the ADA. What the retailer does to inform and assist disabled persons when such problems occur provides an unmistakable signal whether reasonable access is taken seriously in a given store environment.

### **Increasing the Usefulness of the ADA**

The data provide preliminary evidence that the intent of the ADA has not been realized in a shopping context. Such findings raise the question whether the purpose of the law has been realistically analyzed in terms of its outcomes to all parties; that is, whether it has been considered in terms of its public policy achievements. Studies in public policy, macromarketing, general systems, marketing and society, and marketing ethics suggest that understanding can be found at the intersection of the law's purpose, its barriers to implementation, and all costs and benefits. Related studies have considered similar issues, such as FTC advertising regulations, FDA labeling laws, and Consumer Product Safety Commission directives (see Mazis, 1997 for an overview).

A recent study of pharmacists' perceptions of new prescription laws is a case in point. The apparent purpose of the Florida Pharmacists Self-Care Consultant Law was to contain consumer healthcare costs by authorizing retail pharmacists to prescribe approved medications to consumers. However, a closer examination revealed that the law also created discomfort with perceived liability exposure, increased "unrewarded" time spent with patients, and negative personal consequences for pharmacists that limited the law's actual implementation (Szeinbach, Allen, and Barnes, 1998).

A similar set of findings emerged in the disabilities dialogues. Many retailers felt that the perceived benefits of structural compliance were small in contrast with the substantial monetary and atmospheric costs that could be incurred. Some interviewees did not seem to believe that there was a positive outcome for remodeling their stores to meet ADA guidelines. They reported that they could respond to access problems "on the spot" by customer service and friendliness. Many retailers viewed the ADA as a penalty "if they were caught," rather than a tool for understanding disabled persons' needs. A motivation for compliance was liability and "avoidance of lawsuits" rather than a socially-mandated assessment of shopping accessibility. Both cases suggest that policymakers must explicitly consider the full range of motivations and deterrents within the related channel of distribution. Otherwise, access may be uneven based on financial ability to comply and an emphasis on responding when problems occur.

For instance, some large retailers, with substantial capital resources, were able to construct or reconstruct their holdings following the letter of the access manuals. Their mechanistic approach was clearly evident in the team interviews, and did not always result in effective access. Smaller, independent retailers, like many of those in the sample, could not afford structural change, so instead attempted to provide access through personal service and compromise. Their subjective and reactive approach, however, often conveyed unpleasant surprise to disabled customers who did not want to ask for help. It is apparent

that the legislators did not necessarily consider such conflicts between increased ADA-related expense and planned business expenditures. Moreover, retailers were not given incentives to identify affordable nonstructural compliance alternatives. The legislators did not provide evidence to retailers that ADA expense would translate into retail benefits. They, like the case of the Florida pharmacy legislators, did not understand the behavioral tradeoffs that govern many retail decisions. Apparently, the legislators did not understand the center, chain, and retail channel dynamics that can affect the location of ADA compliance authority and decisions.

When retailers did not perceive that disabled consumers wanted to patronize their stores, they questioned the ADA's contribution to their own business. The architectural format of ADA manuals is difficult to translate into operational retail changes that relate directly to the access desired by disabled consumers. The confusing format, unclear level of responsibility, and perceived expense of ADA compliance work against the societal intent of the law. Thus, the law that regulated servicescape access had done so without sufficiently assisting retailers in developing an affordable blend of architectural and non-architectural accommodations that actually related to customer needs. A law that requires retailers to act against their norms of operation becomes difficult to fulfill and appears to create incentives to subvert it through compromises or inattention.

## IMPLICATIONS

The data have exposed numerous contradictions resulting from strictly architectural approaches to the ADA that have apparently overlooked the real meaning of shopping access. Access is not strictly about ramps or wide doorways or even parking spaces. Instead, it is about a sensitive matching of the behaviors desired by retailers and by their mobility-disabled customers. Legislation is likely to fail if it provides mandates for the design of "anystore" without examining the behaviors that take place within it.

The Reasonable Access Framework incorporates both architectural and servicescape analysis with environmental psychology and organizational behavior. It can be used to enable disabled shoppers, retailers, store employees, and legislators to communicate with each other in determining operational definitions for reasonable access in any specific setting. The framework allows all stakeholders to trace the continuous sequence of shopping and non-shopping behaviors to determine whether any have been blocked or impeded. It would solicit input from all parties in their own terms to provide meaningful direction to legislators. Otherwise, the ADA is likely to remain partially-useful at best, failing to provide uniform access for mobility-disabled shoppers in all retail settings.

A law based on architectural standards alone neglects many of the other adaptable dimensions of any shopping environment. Moreover, the "architectural" approach does not effectively consider the relationships among the parts. For instance, when architectural compliance is not affordable or conflicts with aesthetic design plans, access can often be provided through simpler changes or other non-architectural means (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998). For instance, historic buildings that would be marred by adding permanent

ramps could potentially develop a system of well-publicized buzzers, support staff, and portable ramps "on demand."

### **Implications for Retailers**

Retailers, store management, and center developers could use the Reasonable Access Framework to develop a usable code of reasonable access that is tailored to their specific environments. The ADA mandates should not be automatically applied without critically assessing whether any changes would create conflicts between the store needs and objectives and those of disabled customers (following Baker, 1987). The environmental components most important to disabled persons could also be determined and analyzed for "access management." ADA regulations should be considered in the context of specific products, the tasks necessary to inspect them, the height and depth of any related displays, the heaviness and size of the merchandise, and the limitations as well as abilities of the disabled shoppers. Policies could be developed in cooperation with disabled shopper groups that enable the retail planner to design a store environment that provides effective rather than nominal access throughout the continuous sequence.

When retailers evaluate variations in physical complexity and the performance of needed actions (Bitner, 1992), they can also consider what degree of self-service is assumed and whether disabled customers are able to perform needed actions by themselves. If interaction with employees is needed, the retailer should examine whether specific training would smooth interpersonal communications with disabled shoppers. Similarly, the level of technology employed in lean environments must be tested for accessibility, whereas elaborate environments will generally present multiple continuous sequences to evaluate for transition access.

On the shopping center or mall level, retailers should work with mall management to consider critical access issues through the "larger" continuous sequence and the intersection of any specific store with the overall larger aggregate shopping environment. As noted in the findings, mobility-disabled shoppers are frequently barred from an accessible store by having barriers within a larger shopping center's pathway to the store. Conversely, a center that provides reasonable access may find that dissatisfaction with one inaccessible store carries over into a negative evaluation for the entire center. A focus on continuous sequence is essential.

On the national level, specific retail data that demonstrates and documents access contradictions could be systematically collected to make a strong case for ADA revision and further development. National chains, for example, could determine if their individual stores that are architecturally compliant actually provide access that is considered to be "reasonable" by disabled shoppers. Smaller firms that provide alternative rather than architectural access could petition disabilities advocate groups to verify and approve their shopping environments. The methods used by such firms could be compiled into ADA workbooks that address low-cost or non-architectural compliance methods.

## **Implications for Policymakers**

As found in the data, the ADA is perceived as confusing, difficult, and costly by many retailers. Even when the ADA is applied, mobility-disabled shoppers may be uncomfortable using the shopping environment that results. That finding is borne out by discussions and studies reported in various engineering, architectural, and industry publications (“ADA a No-Brainer?” 1998; Simon and Morbey, 1998). Meaningless adaptations have been made to bring stores into compliance “in name only” because ADA guidelines are not easily translated into what the mobility-disabled customer actually wants. Instead, the architectural approach to the ADA should be supplemented with a marketing approach that produces win-win situations for the stakeholders in the process.

Public policymakers should consider amendments to the ADA that enable it to address the whole retail environment. Legislating access based on discrete physical dimensions does not fully utilize the richness of the servicescape in providing the access that disabled shoppers seek. Guidebooks could be developed that speak directly to the conflict that retailers experience. Evidence of store profit and increased customer satisfaction should be tracked, analyzed, and used in promoting actual ADA implementation.

## **Resolution: Going Beyond Widening the Door**

Reasonable access seems to be achievable through a balancing of legally-required architectural attributes, moderated by adjustments in terms of actual merchandise, displays, and specific store environment created by each retailer. The law, however, does not mandate a level of concern for disabled shoppers, nor does it mandate an interactive process among a specific retailer, disabled customers, and the government.

In the context of disabilities access, some retailers did not appear to recognize any moral responsibility to go beyond the provision of compliant features in their buildings. Others, in contrast, indicated that they wanted to provide a welcoming environment for all customers and deliberately sought advice on making their store “approachable” for those with disabilities. However, the ADA has not provided a compelling argument nor a useful process for clearly communicating consumer rights in a way that also preserves retailers’ rights to create a profitable yet accessible store.

As a civil rights law, the ADA has focused on architectural standards of compliance. However, consumer rights cannot be provided without creating an effective dialogue among disabled shoppers and the retail designers who attempt to serve their needs. Consumer rights issues can be identified when gaps in delivery are found in a servicescape. Meaningful solutions, however, are not found in ADA manuals abstracted from the realities of consumer life. Until legislators are prepared to work with consumers and retailers in enacting reasonable access, the contradictory picture is likely to remain. Retailers can take the initiative by establishing their own codes of access based on a process of interaction with actual disabled shoppers. Public policymakers can further develop a set of ADA guidelines based on a holistic perspective joining the insights of designers, legislators, retail managers, and disabled shoppers.

**Acknowledgments:** The author wishes to thank the editor and the reviewers for their constructive support and encouragement throughout the review process. In addition, I would like to recognize the retailers and consumers who shared their time in responding to our questions, and Gagandeep Singh and Gairda Lauterbach-Hagan for investigative background work. Finally, the author extends personal appreciation to student simulation team members; disabled student observation team members; Will Edwards, Coordinator for Disabled Students in the Office of Student Affairs at Rutgers University-Camden; and especially to Cathy, Don, Noreen, Peggy, and the numerous other disabled persons who shared their experiences with us.

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