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Client America Walks
Job NameAW-What Can a Body Do? How We Meet the Built World - a
Conversation with author Sara Hendren (Streamtext)
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Chris was born with a limb that tapers off under the shoulder.

What he has is a soft holster, a sling he fashioned himself to suspend his ankle's so he could do the work of changing the diaper when he was a newborn.

The cat in the hat.

Not sure why it is not working.

Is this showing up now?

If so, I will try again.

If you don't opt in to the prosthesis, we need to see you with that story of wholeness. So now prosthetics are getting this kind of huge family of meanings, political, global, low tech, high-tech, they just go in lots of directions that can't be covered by that story.

I end this chapter with the story here of Cindy in the top center, and she became a quadruple amputee, woke up in quite a new body. As you see here she has amputated almost all the digits on both hands, so she had to figure out a way to grasp and carry things. And this image she has rubber tubing around eye liner to make that job work for her. She qualified for one of those 80 thousand my owe electric limbs like Mikes, and it is collecting dust on the shelf while other tubing is making her life work. She could not have written in that big arm, but she could do what she cared about which is send thank you notes in her recognizable handwriting, so I have a gift of her writing on that legal pad. Again, in the back of the lab, not something just on cyborgs, but getting help plain and simple and in all kinds of unlikely places and at the behest of different people.

I just wanted to expand briefly maybe where do design and disability meet. And now I want to drop in the topic that we're gathered here to talk about more specifically, which is about streets.

The scale of the street, not just the prosthetic limb but the urban streets of our lives and how we get down them. And this is an image of a city sidewalk with two women, one walking and one using a motorized wheelchair. This tends to be the story people think of when they think of it in the built environment. Either we are doing some form of walk or wheeling and thinking about curb cuts.

It gets way more interesting at the scale of streets. Let me give you more architecture examples, but they have examples. This is an image of deaf space, it is an architectural space at Gallaudet.

And in this image there are people walking down a concrete ramp and seated in club chairs around tables and also near wooden benches and there is a lot of natural light and wood rafters. The walls are painted in these soft blues and the upholstery is in a medium green and blue. All of those choices actually are features of depth space. So not fixing or curing of deafness which we think of as cochlear implants, that are used by some at Gallaudet, it is a mixed experience. But deaf space is making our built environment in to a place where deaf people can thrive. For example, those colors, those solid colors are chosen to make a high contrast of skin tones.

If you're going they serve the general public, it is the public sphere.

For a hearing person like me I would approach and write my order on a wipe away tablet and pay in the automated way and my name would come up on a TV monitor and neither of us as a hearing person with limited ASL or a person who is signing deaf staff member needed to make a lot of huge moves in order for us to communicate.

This is where a wipe away tablet and monitor is pretty evasive, and yet the

signing Starbucks does something nobody else does.

Just one more example I talk about in the room and the room chapter is this man, Steve, who has an advanced form of A-L-S. You are looking at him in his room which is brightly painted, red, and he has pictures all over the walls and colorful upholstery and so on. He is sitting in a motorized wheelchair that has a wheelchair mounted, pretty elaborate tablet and text to speech operations. Steve now has very limited mobility, eye movement and a little bit of head movement. What you can't see in this image is he has a tiny cursor on the nose bridge of his glasses that is talking to the tablet on his chair. And that is how he constructs sentences for his speaker to play, but that is also by Steve's design how he opens and closes all the doors. How he summons the elevators in his building. So I should back up, Steve, when he first got his diagnosis, he did what everybody else would do with a condition of A-L-S and was looking to medicine for the prospect of cures which we still await, and that he would still welcome today. But he also started thinking in terms of design and started to imagine the kind of environment I want to live in when my mobility is quite reduced from what it is now. And sure enough this is the result of that design. This is one room in the salient house which is on the floor of the assisted living center here outside of Boston. He lives in this residents, this cursor drives the electronics, media, all kinds of things. He designed this, but also partnering with philanthropist and engineers prior to the smart home products that we know now designed this living space for himself and other people with A-L-S and MS and designed -- in other words, a life worth living, designed an automated space where he could enjoy quite a quality of life mediated by technology. I think that is an interesting principal here of thinking ahead about not just what people lose, but the way they adapt and Steve's definition of a life worth living built with technology.

So let me expand then to the street with a few examples that you may or may not have heard of that are also ways for us to think flexibly about design. One is the green man plus program in Singapore, so you see a man with a card hovering over a box at a crossing signal. That card has a microchip that will expand the walking seconds, the time, for crossing that street. So this is at 500 intersections now at Singapore, which makes a flexible environment for older adult that is can qualify for this card to get up to 12 or 13 extra seconds in the crosswalk just for them, after which the normative crossing time resumes. So if there is a default crossing time and then there is this green man plus, these extra seconds in the crosswalk. I love that elegant way of making the built world flex and bend.

I am also interested in this robot, I tend to be skeptical of robotic, but it is the guys who make mope Eds. This is a round at the scale of a really thick car wheel, so a round robotic in bright blue that follows you at a friendly distance. It carries up to 40 pounds of cargo. So here is an image with its hatch open and a bunch of groceries on the left, and then on the right an image of it being loaded with groceries.

Again, we can be suspicious of products, but you can think about the city users who might stay in their dwelling if they did have assistance like this for getting around in space when they can no longer carry, for example, heavy groceries or anybody who has a motor difference or you shall shoes of that source. They have a lot of street escape experience.

We also know now about curb cuts and official ramps. There is a ramp activist project called the stop gap. It is run by a wheelchair user who is also an engineer who wanted to get this kind of condition solved in his home City of Toronto, and that is the single step entrance. So you're looking at two doors where the entrance has a gap.

So they provide materials or the kind of instructions for building a very low tech ramp out of wood like you're seeing here and they often have this stencilled font and a woven rope on the side for easy carrying and handling. But the brightness in them and that stencilled type face is drawing attention to this need for temporary plants that are not required by law if you have an old structure like this one and a small mom and pop project. So this is both a design project but also a public relations project of saying look at this condition here. It is actually fairly easy to fix and it is the right thing to do for an inclusive world.

Here is a screen shot from their 2013 website. And I am just showing this to show you we have presently populated the world with 2000 plus ramps, so that is a robust project not just in provision of access but drawing attention to access.

Just a last few examples. This is the dementia village in the Netherlands. What here is an open plaza with fountains, people sitting at chairs and a table and a cafe with a terrace on the outside. And in the background just a two level residents. This is a locked facility. It is a nursing home for various people with dementia of various kinds. But it is designed as a city with an operational grocery store, a hairstylist, Barbara shop, a gym, a theatre. It also importantly has a restaurant that is opened to the general public of the town and also to the residents. It has a really nice public private way of making business, making a revenue stream for one thing, but also having people connected to the city. This is a whole way of thinking about the street in part as treatment. So in other words the theory behind design as part of memory care is helping to maintain for people this continuity the past life. So not just memory challenges, but navigational challenges that are common in people with dementia. This is a way to give them situations they're in that will quell anxiety. And they have quite remarkable numbers in terms of the drop-in requests for antianxiety medication. So they have visitors from all over the world that say who would have thought design could have been part of this medical care in a very literal way.

And then lastly in my own world design for developmental disability in public space. I think a lot about the assistance in public for the city group called epic here in Boston and it is staffed by young adults with disability, some physical, some developmental, some both.

It is targeted for this population, but it is a year's worth of community service, 100 hours or something, and also mock interviews and resume help and basics of disability rights all for these young people that have been quite patronized. Their expectations have often been quite low, and how important it is for people to appear in public, picking up trash in public parks, helping paint doors at an urban high school they do every year.

For these young people it is not only in public space in a practical way, but it is them being in a sphere not on the receiving end of help but giving end. So few people can imagine this. So I would like to invite everybody here at America walks not just about literal mobility but social mobility, who do we expect to see in public space and what are forms of assistance. This is a form of design, where getting around in public space is not the literal matter but a socio political matter.

With all of that I will just affirm again the desirability and creativity of assistance in its all designed forms. I will switch to Claire now, hopefully she can tell us what she is observing in her work.

>> Can you hear me and see me now?

Thank you so much. I am glad to be here and be part of this. I am part of America walks now and I am legally blind myself, pretty profoundly blind. I find this conversation really exciting because the way that myself and other blind or vision impaired people interact with the urban environment, the rural environment, whatever, city or town landscape is, is really profound because if cities or towns, infrastructure are designed one way, we can have complete access. And if they're designed in other ways they can be extremely limiting. I would be happy if there are questions to give examples, but just the design of buildings.

One example, the school I got my guide dog from, guide dogs for the blind outside of San Francisco, knows that its customers or clients are blind. They do things like the floor in their dormitory is built out of a material that is likely not to have a glare. So people who may have partial vision they make sure there is no glare on the floor. They have a panel across each wall, so if you need to trail the wall easily there is something to grab on to. So things like that are just a few minor examples of ways you can make the built in environment of a building, street or town more assessable for people that are blind or visually impaired.

>> Fantastic. Also the way they subtly even in the 19th century used the relative distance between the bricks and the ceiling to create an echo or hallway. And then another sonic environment nearby so you can do location. It is incredibly creative. And I hope people are hearing that. I think a lot of times I find people come along with you conceptually when you say this is an important issue, but I find the creativity is amazing. Somehow they bypass the deep inventiveness of what is happening.

>> Yes, and just having fun with it, at the same school they have several gardens with different flowers. So as you walk across campus you experience different smells. The texture of the street below you, you know, can be brick versus grass versus cement. Things like that in my own neighborhood I use the tactile features to know if I'm almost on my own street because suddenly the pavement has changed to brick. Yes, I agree it can be really fun to just play with the different textures and sounds and smells and all kinds of different things around you.

>> Thank you both so much. We are getting a couple of great questions coming in. And first of all I will kick us off with whether or not you say car free or car light streets are some of the easiest or low tech ways to make streets were for people of all abilities, you know, this person says car free streets are obviously a simple design and then we can work on better benches, better lighting, more rest oriented spaces. What do you think about that?

>> So I am not familiar with too many locations that have car free streets. My initial knee jerk reaction is that it might be disconcerting for those of us that are blind because we use these landmarks to understand space around us. For instance, when I'm walking across the street, I use the sound of cars to understand which way traffic is going, if it is safe to cross or not cross, just to even know I'm by a street. Sometimes the texture of the floor so that you can't discriminate between others just having streets gives you the concept that oh, Kay, I am walking down main street or that kind of thing. So those sounds offer a lot of input. So that's to say if there were not car free streets and I was oriented to it, that would be great because then I would know I was safe. But I guess my point being that in certain circumstances

things like that are really helpful.

I grew up in Orange County, California, which is very suburban and so the traffic flow is really different. I always said I want to live in a city, because having those things are helpful so then I moved to D.C.

>> That is really interesting. And I have heard similar concerns from people, so just -- I mean, naturally people will think what is lost, right? It is important to pay attention to that and we had streets in my neighborhood that were not car free, but ten miles an hour, new rules and it was rolled out slowly, three streets at a time. It was very interesting to watch as a parent of kids with down syndrome that needs to think about the dangers in crossing and the other things we have taught him.

I will say there are signals every where in the tradition of cities, meaning tactile, meaning the elegant way in the Netherlands like I mentioned but other countries where very elegant separate bike lanes with different traffic lights have been created. This stuff is not easy, but the traditions are there and I think between tactile paving, things like flex it post and dedicated lanes and bump outs, some combination of the way that lots of planners have very intentionally thought about ways to calm traffic, to suddenly direct people could be brought to bare and make streets more accessible. I would certainly under score what Claire said and invite people in to those conversations and try to think, if you're a planner, you have to look at the signal behind the signal. People will ask you about what the and that, and we will lose what we value. What is it that we want the get done and then what are all the vast traditions, the creative traditions of subtle editing to the built environment and how can we employ those in a new way to get that sustainable future.

>> Thank you both. It obviously has great implications for what you said on how fast we're moving toward car light areas and how exactly we do that and the inclusiveness of who is at the table.

>> I also want to say a subtlety that I think a lot of people aren't aware of that could also be employed in this way, and that is the tea in Boston where I live. At a certain point all the payments for your cards, all that transaction were automated so that there is not a person staffed at the desk. Fine, if those are accessible, that's fine, but what has been interesting is that at least in Boston there is now a red shirted person standing on the platform. Not at the kiosk, but platform. That is reassuring to someone like me where you want the human form of assistance who can answer questions live and in play. That is not something you would be looking for electronics or ramp, but where is the design form of assistance that is this evolved animal. You can answer the specific question at the specific time. The train is not coming, I have to go to bus, can you assist me in getting there. And I can think of ways that would make the city more navigable. 1 Of The Ways of thinking of car free streets, what are the forms of assistance and where would those live and would they be human or technological. You have to be as creative as you can.

>> Someone wants to know if you two can discuss the nuances versus steps versus ramps for differing abilities. This person's relative has trouble with Parkinson's and can use stairs but not ramps.

>> Yes, this is one of those things where the first thing I say is that I find it unsatisfying that in the general discourse around bodies and cities, it feels to me sometimes like the most creative things people can talk about is healthy stairs. My

goodness that is an interesting idea. But think that is the promise land of the future of the city, and I think bodies come in all kinds of navigational modes and capacity. That is probably the least creative we can be. The history of the world is designed with lots of stairs that are hard to navigate for lots of people, city halls that never imagined a user in the winter accompanied by a small toddler trying to get up the steps.

These conditions of interdependence and assistance are mostly designed out of our built environment. Let me state that as a general dissatisfaction in my watching of the way design and bodies get talked about.

Meanwhile taking for granted the incredible way of the environment that happened with curb cuts at the demand of disabled people that benefits stroller pushers and people with wheeled luggages. It is a politics we enjoy every day.

I think in one person's use case, it is like there is no way to design a spoke world for any of us, of course. And I think it is this are there multiple ways to get in to the building where it is a public building where the public sphere really matters. In other words, ramps are not the solution for everything, it is this matter of multiple modes when again the public sphere is at stake.

>> Yes, I would piggy back what you were saying. When it comes to accommodations, under the disabilities act you do have to make accommodations. But ideally the accommodation would be multi modal, I like that word, because when it comes to accommodations under the ADA, they provide as many examples as possible but we recognize that one is not a one size fits all because disabilities are different for every person and every person is different. So I understand there are always limitations with size and space and moniker, et cetera. But in this world we have that multi modal opportunity, no two are the same. In the ideal world we would like to have as many accommodations as possible.

>> It is important to say Zoom and video conferencing is providing some of that, right? For getting in public space in general is laden with challenges, that has been an opening, not just during closure periods.

So the whole thing is to pay as close attention as possible to the adaptive possibilities that people are making for themselves all the time and then asking, as Claire said, when the legal structures are really important to be actionable to make the built of the public sphere materially to us.

>> I have to make a quick funny comment with Zoom and et cetera. Because for generations people with disabilities who might have an a physical disability or health disability that makes going to work every day for difficult, people have been yelling at the top of their lungs can I please work from home? And for years and years it was no, that's not too hard, we can't accommodate you. And then this thing called COVID happened and we all started working from home and suddenly it was totally doable. So the disability community has literally thrown their hands up in the air saying are you kidding me? So if COVID ever enters, knock on wood, the disability community is holding our breath and said we made our point, and if they come back and said we can't do it any longer, there is going to be lots of yelling.

>> Yes, I was nodding my head vigorously.

>> I can't imagine we can't go back there now that we exercised this. Thank you for

sharing that.

Sara, in the book you talk a bit about the increasing number of people on the autism spectrum who would say it is not necessarily a disease they suffer from, but something to fully embrace and utilize as advantageous and asset in terms of neuro diversity. I am wondering how you might anticipate or imagine the ways that celebrating neuro diversity could kind of creatively impact and show up in our built in environment. And you use a great example of I think it is Stephen in the book, so you can touch on that if you would like to.

>> Yes, I mean so lots of people when we have the conversation about prosthetics or whatever they say what about cognitive and developmental disability. I am invested in that in my own family and I have a number of family members on the autism spectrum as well. And it is not a replacement part, is it? It is what are the forms of assistance we would want to think about. It is a big movement. It is a complicated one mixed for sure and no one story is the right one but there is a big ground swell, certainly in the United States, in the autism community to recognize diversity as a human variation and not a thing to be fixed.

A lot of controversy around different therapies. Very useful debate, very interesting. It is not a one sided thing. It is quite complicated. And there have been interesting service design experiments, things like IT firms that are staffed on the autism spectrum not as a charity but because the cognitive profile of autism not all the time but statistically significant amount of the time comes with deep skills and pattern recognition and what is required. Those have been viable and replicated globally. So in other words, rearranging the design of services with consultants that actually enhances and thinking of the job and a good employee in a slightly different way. It is interesting.

And there are people at the Helen center at one of the big design schools in London that thinks about sensory processing and some other things not synonymous with autism but often attend and come with it. I tell the story of Steven in the book who has a young story talks about sensory overwhelm who started a linear prosthesis by making lines through public space to make it legible to him.

>> I would echo what you say. I have lots of friends who are autistic, I should say, but many want to be autistic because they are proud of who they are and their identity. Lots of people have expertise in the way their brain works and functions and they are just outstanding at things. And so, yes, it is just not a disability, it is a different way of your brain processing things that can really be an asset for somebody like me neuro difficult, I don't have those abilities, so yes, it is a different way of your brain working.

>> And I think this sort of -- the most powerful critique that activism offers to the world is a critique of individualism, especially productive economic proficient individualism. In other words the myth that any of us is walking around unassisted or the mist of proving our worth at how legibly organizable we are. Neuro diversity is taking a pretty big swing at the idea that you hustle through education so you can do the test scores in this one form of intelligence so you can become a productive worker, economic unit.

It begs us to keep understanding what is the dignity of being a human, full stop outside of those measurements and protocols.

Do we want that to share or describe our human worth. That is our principal

question I would ask people to grapple with.

>> I totally agree. I love that. Thank you.

We have a lot more questions and we're getting to the hour. I think we will go over a few minutes if everybody is okay with that and get to one or more and wrap up. We will send some of these additional questions to the panelist.

>> I have to drop off at close to 3:00 o'clock.

>> Well, you know what, I think we will wrap up with one last question because our audiences like to take away something actionable at the end of these, if possible. In terms of the advocacy realm that we are in for people first rollable, bikable places, how can we ensure our spaces are more intentionally organized and presenting in ways that are all inviting and breaking down these norms and productivity stuff. It is critical we take this space for people of all physical and intellectual abilities to join and flourish its advocates. How can organizations like America walks and grass roots organizers better examine and unpack those norms that we kind of set forth when we do this work?

>> This is Claire. I think it is really important that starting at the grass roots level and advocates and people who are in the urban planning space or any roll you have that these kinds of things are brought about and that people with disabilities are brought to the conversation. I don't think people mean to be -- my guide dog is behind me looking. But I don't think people mean to be rude and don't want to include people with disabilities, they just don't think about it. I could equally say for myself, you know, I am a Caucasian woman, so I don't know what it is like to be part of an ethnic minority. I would like to think I'm not being negative to those communities, I just haven't had those lived experiences so those things aren't in the forefront of my thoughts. So I am trying hard, especially in light of everything, to be more intentional about those things and because I am so naive to that, talking and bringing people in those lived experiences in to the conversation. So I would say I hope it can be the same way with disabilities, that one, people would become more cognizant of our community and think about it, and then bring us in to the conversation because we have the limited experience. With that I have to drop off. Thank you so much.

>> Thank you, Claire. It has been wonderful having you, we really appreciate your insight and expertise.

>> Thank you, Claire.

Yes, just plus one to what Claire said. America walks in its various situations could have some pretty low level community workshops where they're just inviting input and feedback, and America rests on the bench, you know, America walks with assistance, America wheels in addition.

But I think the ethnographic research that a lot of designers do is observe people. And I have been on audits in that way where you walk with somebody through a whole group and you're paying close attention. You can't as a planner and advocate get very literal and hung up on this person said one thing and then this person said the opposite. It is contradictory, too complex, I will not do anything. So what a lot of designers do is not just build what people say, but take in a whole lot of

feedback and then try to synthesize and see the patterns emerging and do the best you can to make a more flexible city. In other words, America walks can do well to not champion this kind of athletic use of the city, so much as embodied, and that is a big house use of public space. It is not that hard ultimately. You may be afraid of getting it wrong, but to do that let's get a community walk through and see what people really do. Not to see, oh my goodness, how tragic and hard it is because they are adapting. So then learn stuff. You have to stay curious and develop that capacity to see the signal behind the signal. There is what people are telling you and then what are the patterns and values that stands for and how would you recombine those in the design of the city.

>> Thank you so much. I really appreciate your emphasis of that in the book, just getting out there and building those relationships that are important for everything that you just said.

Thank you Sara and Claire who had to leave, thank you for sharing your insights and your expertise and your personal experiences. Thank you to all for attending and being engaged and present with us here. Obviously a lot of profound layers to think about and apply to the work we're doing. If you are interested in checking out Sara's book there is a link in the chat as well.

We had some questions about the brands of some of the robotic products you were showing, so we can gather that from you afterwards too and share that with every one. Thank you again to our sponsors today. And if you enjoyed the discussion, we want to ask again that you think about playing a small part in keeping more don't like this coming your way by making a small donation if it happens to suit you. Anything counts and it goes to improving our extending our work. You will find a link to do nation in the chat box. I want to let you know about our next Webinar, the Biden and transportation. That will happen Monday February 22nd. We have a great group of panelists to discuss what the inauguration of president Joe Biden and Pete as U.S. DOT leader might mean for U.S. transportation policy. We have heard a lot of talk of increased transit funding, removal of highways in black communities, so there are a lot of questions on what this might look like. And of course how we can implement and think about this conversation here today with regard to that as well.

We will be addressing those questions in that Webinar and more. Thank you for being here, it is a pleasure to spend this time with you. Keep a look out for the survey material so you can tell us what you thought of the Webinar. We really do value and pay attention to your feedback and input. Sara, thank you so much and have a wonderful day every one.