

MAPPING DISABLED ACCESS

One significant aspect of town planning that is often overlooked is access for disabled people. As disabled people have long testified, the buildings and public spaces that make up the towns and cities of Ireland are largely inaccessible. Whilst this situation is slowly beginning to change, poor planning and inadequate execution of features designed to improve access is still commonplace. This situation is compounded by weak legislation in the guise of *Part M of the Building Regulations (1991, 1997)*, which is full of loopholes and is, in general, unenforced.

The result is that, all too often, disabled people are largely forgotten by planners or tokenistic gestures are made. Moreover, some well intended actions do little to aid access because they are not part of an overall, integrated plan - the dishing of a pavement is of little use if it leads to a flight of stairs. In short, the Irish urban landscape is an exclusionary landscape, one that through its design disables people. In essence, the 12-15% of Irish people who are disabled do not enjoy the same freedom to independently undertake daily activities, such as visiting the shops or going to the pub, that non-disabled people take for granted.

The disabled people's movement in Ireland actively campaigns against such exclusion. *Newbridge Access Group*, (NAG) formed in 1997, is one such group who have campaigned with some success for better access in Newbridge. Two of its recent strategies have been to work closely with other groups in the town (e.g., Tidy Towns who have entered the access section of the national competition for the first time and started an annual award for the most accessible premises in the town — this year won by Newbridge Credit Union) and to undertake a detailed access audit of the town.

PROJECT STAGES

This latter project is on-going and is a collaborative project, undertaken with the Department of Geography at NUI Maynooth. The project is divided into three parts. The first part, which is complete, was to map levels of access in the town. The second part is to produce an accompanying guide, including a list of the most pressing problems and a guide to good practice. The third part will be to mount a public exhibition of the maps and photographs produced during the study. The project as a whole will be used to lobby the local council and businesses in Newbridge to tackle existing problems and to adopt more disabled-friendly planning approaches in the future.

The first part of the project consisted of seven phases. The *first phase* consisted of planning how to undertake the audit. The initial task was to develop a symbol set that would incorporate all the problems a disabled person (with either a physical or sensory impairment) might encounter (see Box 1). The symbols had to be of a nature that they could easily be applied to base maps (at 1:1250 scale) in the field, were easily recognisable, covered all types of problems, and were

transferable so that groups in other towns could also use them, and were developed in relation to symbols used on other projects (e.g. Fry 1988, Vujakovic and Matthews 1994). To our knowledge, this is the most comprehensive and sophisticated disabled access symbol set yet developed, and we have also developed a set for the inside of buildings. Next we decided which areas of the town would be surveyed, and determined strategies for dividing the work between the group's members. It was decided that main shopping and civic areas be covered.

Box 1: Symbols Employed in Newbridge Map

SURFACES		ON PAVEMENT	
		Disabled	Non-Disabled
Smooth	Scam-rough	Toilets	Ur/Bex
Rough	Gradient (never in absence of steps)	Female	Male
Gradient/Semi-rough	Gradient/Rough	Telephone	Post Box
Tactile Surface	No path	Quick ATM	Secret Flurlock
		Seat	Steps (with noselift)
		Ramp	Ramp (with handrail)
		Narrow Footpath	Big kerb
		Rail	
PARKING/CROSSINGS		OFF-PAVEMENT	
Designated Space	Undesignated Space	Good	With lip
Disking	Disking/Lip	With steps	Steps walkie
No Disking	Pedestrian Crossing (Zebra)	Steps or Lip outside/steps inside	
Disking but no crossing	Avoid (with time)		
No disking/no crossing		Single swing door	Double swing door
		Narrow door	Electric door

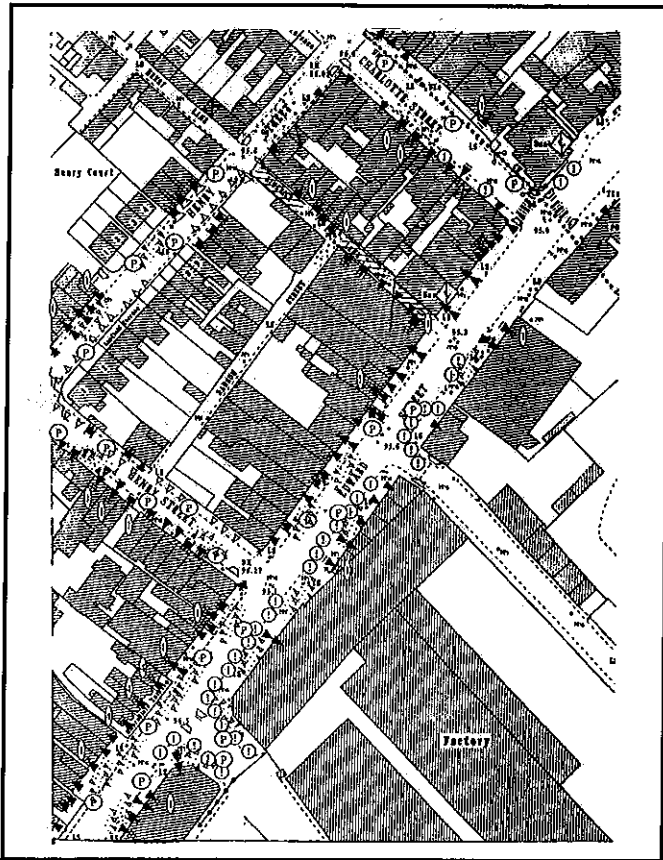
The *second phase* was to pilot test these symbols by mapping a small part of the town. Several new symbols were added to the set, as problems were encountered. The *third phase* then consisted of training the group's members in basic map reading, how to recognise specific problems, and how to apply the symbols to the map. This included undertaking a pilot study of one street, so that members had guided experience in the environment of mapping access.

The *fourth phase* was the actual survey itself. This was undertaken on Saturday 14th August 1999. In total 9 people undertook the survey. Group members were divided into four pairs, who were each assigned part of the town. Each was supplied with 'blown-up' A3 maps (originally scaled at 1:1250) of their designated area, along with a tape measure and a camera. The camera was used to record particular problems encountered. The remaining person, the project leader, moved between the pairs to monitor progress and to help with any problems. The designated areas were all mapped within a couple of hours.

Using the data collected, the *fifth phase* consisted of producing professional-quality access maps. Each base map was scanned into a computer and the symbols were placed on it with the Microsoft package, Powerpoint. This strategy was chosen deliberately because it provides a low-cost approach using software that is relatively common (as opposed to sophisticated

mapping packages). One of the sheets that compose the access map is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Part of the Newbridge access map



The *sixth phase* involved the checking of the symbols on the map with the environment itself. To gain consistency, one group member not involved in the initial data collection, resurveyed the town using the maps, checking the validity of each symbol.

Finally, the complete access map and symbol set was loaded onto the Internet as a series of pages, where each page was a sheet that composed the map. Using a simple set of arrows to navigate, the whole map can be viewed. By clicking on 'hotspots' on the map the user is connected to photos of particular access problems. In total, 25 photos are included, and a sub-sample are shown in Figure 2.

RESULTS

The maps reveal that much of Newbridge is inaccessible to disabled people travelling independently. Scores of shops have entrances with steps or lips, and many premises are located upstairs. Indeed, every private dentist in the town is upstairs and wheelchair users have to travel to Naas to receive dental care (there is no accessible transport on this route). Disabled toilets are few and far between, and their location needs to be known in advance. Facilities such as cash machines, post boxes and telephones are too high to be used. There are no designated parking places in most of the town, and those that are designated are often taken by non-disabled drivers. Where there have been attempts to improve access by dishing the pavement, this has been done inadequately

so that a lip remains. Indeed, the latest re-paving and make-over of the town has been very poorly executed, to the extent that features designed to aid access totally fail in their aims.

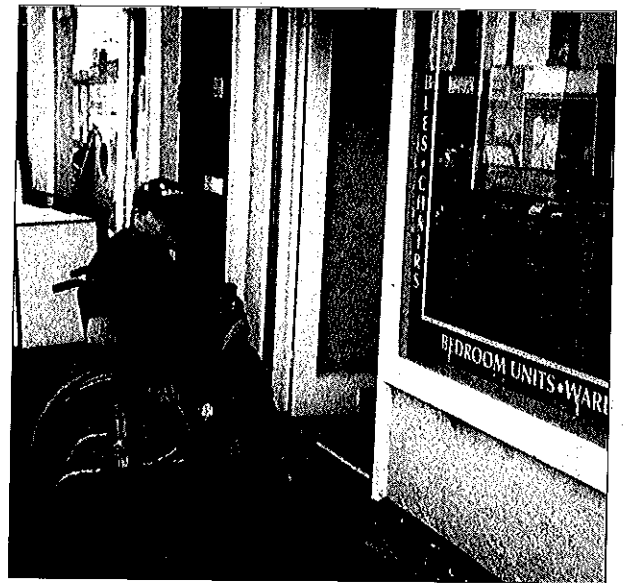
Figure 2: Photos Depicting Access Problems





Whilst the maps are highly detailed and reveal the state of access in Newbridge, they do not tell the whole picture, as revealed in some of the photographs. For example, Newbridge is littered with temporary objects that move daily, such as placards and bins that cause significant obstacles to blind people and constitute an assault course for wheelchair users. Moreover, illegal parking constitutes a significant problem, with cars parked on pavements narrowing their width, and cars parking on double-yellow lines blocking dish crossings. One of our most telling photos is of a driving school car parked on double-yellow lines preventing a wheelchair user from crossing the road!

These maps, we believe, should be completed for every town in Ireland for two reasons. First, they reveal the levels of access in each town and provide a blueprint from which future planning can proceed. Second, they provide valuable information to disabled people about access in a particular town, allowing them to plan routes and daily activities given the constraints imposed by the environment. Indeed, it is NAGs hope that the technical blueprint they have developed will be



applied to several more towns in County Kildare in the near future, and that town planners may also start to produce and act upon such information.

Dr. Rob Kitchin and Newbridge Access Group

REFERENCES

Fry, C. (1988) "Maps for the physically disabled". *The Cartographic Journal* 25, 20-28.

Vujakovic, P. and Matthews, M. (1994) "Contorted, folded, torn: environmental values, cartographic representation, and the politics of disability". *Disability and Society* 9, 359-374.

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NEW BOOK ON IRISH PLANNING LAW PUBLISHED

Planning law has become extremely complex with nine planning Acts and twelve sets of Planning Regulations. Yet it is a subject in which everybody has an interest - the lay person and the professional. *An Introduction to Irish Planning Law*, written by Berna Grist of the Department of Regional and Urban Planning, University College Dublin, provides an introduction to the Irish planning system in an accessible and affordable format. It identifies and covers the main aspects of planning, addressing in turn development plans, applications and appeals, exempted development, enforcement and compensation. There are also chapters on regional planning, urban renewal and related legislation.

Written in non-legal language, *An Introduction to Irish Planning Law* is fully referenced to the various sections of the relevant Acts and Regulations, thus enabling any reader to find their way towards further and more detailed sources of information. The book will be launched by Professor Vincent Dodd of University College Dublin on 16 December 1999 in UCD. This book will constitute an invaluable resource for students and practitioners of planning and related disciplines, elected representatives, and members of community organisations.

Copies of *An Introduction to Irish Planning Law* by Berna Grist can be obtained from all major bookshops and the Institute of Public Administration (IPA) publishing division, Dublin 15, Ireland.