

What's accessibility got to do with ecocentrism?

Hannah Battersby

Hannah is a postdoctoral researcher within the Institute of Philosophy at KU Leuven, Belgium. Her research is in environmental ethics, with a focus on relational environmental values and intersectional, non-anthropocentric justice.

Drawing on disability studies, animal studies and ecocentric environmental ethics, this article argues that built and managed environments are organized around a narrow anthropocentric ideal of embodiment – the able-bodied, mobile, independent and economically productive human individual. Such environments thus tend to marginalize both disabled humans and nonhuman beings, albeit differently, through spatial arrangements that privilege certain forms of embodiment while excluding or devaluing others. These ableist and speciesist exclusions are traced to a common set of assumptions about value, normality and belonging embedded within social systems. Ecocentrism challenges these assumptions by affirming the intrinsic value of life's diversity and recognizing the interdependence of nonhuman communities. From this perspective, accessibility emerges not as a purely human technological concern, but as a multispecies ethical concern centred on human–nonhuman co-dwelling compatible with ecological limits. Ecocentric approaches to planning, architecture and design should be guided by principles of ecologically constrained multispecies co-dwelling, in which diverse forms of life are recognized as legitimate co-inhabitants of shared environments.

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My lived experience as a variably disabled person navigating built and managed environments has made visible something often unnoticed by those whose bodies align with dominant spatial norms. Contemporary built environments are designed for a privileged human archetype. Streets, buildings, recreational areas and other shared, curated and managed spaces typically presuppose an able-bodied, mobile, economically productive and independent subject. For those such as myself whose bodies diverge from this model, built environments become landscapes of barriers and exclusions, requiring continuous negotiation of obstacles. These obstacles comprise not

only physical barriers, but also social meanings and values. Disability scholars have long argued that accessibility is therefore not simply a technical matter of ramps and lifts, but a question of how social life is organized – that is, which bodies are anticipated, enabled or marginalized. Managed and built environments materialize these normative assumptions and judgements through architecture, planning and design; producing forms of spatial injustice, which are then realized through construction practices that are ecologically hostile.

In this article, I argue that considering (in)accessibility reveals something further: the spatial norms that marginalize disabled people are not isolated phenomena, but expressions of a broader anthropocentric paradigm that structures relations between humans, nonhuman beings and the environments they share. Anthropocentrism sustains patterns of domination that underpin ableism, speciesism and environmental degradation. Ecocentrism challenges these logics by affirming the intrinsic value of life in its diversity (Washington *et al.*, 2017; Piccolo *et al.*, 2018). If this commitment is taken seriously, the spatial organization of built environments cannot remain anthropocentric, and accessibility therefore emerges as a central concern of ecocentric justice. Crucially, ecocentric accessibility cannot entail unrestricted human presence and inclusion, but instead requires ecologically constrained forms of multi-species, and *multi-body*, co-dwelling.

Overlapping critiques and a common culprit

Built environments are typically organized around what Garland-Thompson (1997) calls the *normate body*: able-bodied, mobile, economically productive and independent. When planning assumes such a body, those who diverge from it encounter disabling design (Hall and Imrie, 1999). Exclusion thus arises not merely from impairment but from the spatial organization of environments themselves – an organization that privileges certain bodies while marginalizing others. Furthermore, the embodiment privileged by built and managed environments is a narrow archetype of *human* embodiment, with belonging structured through interlaced norms of both ability and species. In one of the parallels of “(de)valuation” that “cross species” (Santinele Martino and Lindsay, 2020) noted by scholars in critical animal studies, built and managed environments often render both disabled humans and nonhuman life as deviations from the expected spatial order, and in turn, as forms of life to be managed, controlled or excluded rather than legitimate (default) co-inhabitants of shared environments.¹

Scholars from various disciplines have criticized the fact that animals and their needs do not tend to be considered in the planning, design and development of built environments, and are rarely treated as legitimate co-dwellers of managed and/or built space. Where they are considered, they tend to be factored into planning and design decisions either as resources or as obstacles to be managed – as unwanted and unwelcome ‘intruders’ (Dobraszczyk, 2023; Hadidian, 2015). Architectural research has historically focused on *preventing* the presence of nonhuman animals, not engendering multispecies co-dwelling.

Moreover, the impacts of *constructing* the built environment are also negative for nonhumans and for nonhuman nature overall, owing to the consequent ecological harms. Relevantly, scholars of critical animal and disability studies have pointed out that the ‘myth’ of the individual lauded in modern industrialized societies not only contributes to the social construction of disability, it concurrently fosters the exploitation of nature, and, in turn, environmental degradation (Ray and Sibara, 2017). Consider that construction is deeply implicated in biodiversity loss, climate change and massive ecological disruption. The present political economy of building centred around continual growth and expansion is ecologically unsustainable – this applies even to ‘green growth’ initiatives – and poses an existential threat to our (and presumably other) species, as Imrie (2022) discusses. More fundamentally, the *status quo* regarding construction of the built environment assumes an ‘instrumentalist rationality’ regarding the environment; it is predicated on the idea that the ecological world is “a means to an end rather than an end in itself” (Imrie, 2022: 191–2).

Scholars working at the intersections of architecture, urban planning and various multispecies studies have begun to challenge prevailing anthropocentric logics within design approaches. Research on multispecies design has explored how built environments might be conceived as shared habitats rather than exclusively human domains (Grobman *et al.*, 2023). These discussions echo elements of disability critiques regarding the conventional approach to design and planning insofar as the presumption of a normate *human* subject, for whom sovereignty over space is assumed, is problematized. Decisions about access are informed by dominant human biases and prejudices under an anthropocentric view (Taylor, 2017). Where the disability and multispecies criticisms converge concerns the common culprit with regards to ableist and speciesist spatial injustices: the archetypal ‘normal’ user of space that conforms to a narrow form of embodiment dictated by anthropocentric, as well as capitalist and neoliberal, ideology (Nocella *et al.*, 2019). As Taylor points out, a common ranking of capacities that has long served to marginalize disabled humans also shapes how nonhuman animals are evaluated and treated under prevailing anthropocentric conditions. Taylor highlights that the same hierarchy of capacities underpinning ableism also structures speciesism. Speciesism, in this sense, is closely imbricated with ableism (Taylor, 2017: 57).

Ecocentrism and the intrinsic value of life's diversity

The denial and devaluation of diversity, stemming from oppressive anthropocentric ideals, assumptions and value hierarchies, incurs multiple, intersecting, spatial injustices that are borne out through the built environment. The question is now how we might ethically respond to this. At the heart of these spatial injustices is a disregard for life's diversity and the multiplicity of embodiments that life can take – and denial of their value and legitimacy. Ecocentrism serves as a corrective because it rejects anthropocentrism and affirms the intrinsic value of all life, including in the natural diversity of organisms (Rolston, 1988; Callicott, 1989; Piccolo *et al.*, 2018).

If life and its diversity is considered to possess intrinsic value, then there are consequences for the construction, organization and management of shared space. Within an ecocentric design philosophy, the organization of space around anthropocentric norms that deny diversity and discriminate by privileging a narrow form of embodiment – the rational, independent, able-bodied, human archetype – is no longer tenable. Planning and design must instead consider the presence and value of multiple forms of life with all their diverse forms of embodiment and modes of being; whose flourishing is valid, and dependent on mutual, inclusive and sustainable social-ecological arrangements. The environment and its ecological systems must also be considered in the design and configuration of shared, managed environments.

Accessibility and ecocentrism come into contact here because ecocentrism rejects the anthropocentric paradigm which structures present practices of design, planning, and construction (Imrie, 2022). This paradigm has historically shaped urbanization and development of the built environment based on domination of a certain body over all others, and of this body over ecological space itself – a patterned relational dynamic connected to various forms of ableism and disablement affecting both humans and nonhuman nature (Wolbring 2013). An ecocentric perspective reframes this dynamic by shifting the locus of value to life, seeing intrinsic value in the diversity of life, and recognizing the fundamental interdependency of planetary life.

Here we can draw parallels between disability studies and ecocentrism insofar as both underscore the reality of human dependency and of global, ecological interdependency; dispelling the anthropocentric myth of the independent individual insulated from vulnerability (Washington, 2013; Nocella and George, 2017). The symmetry between these positions in this regard was expressed by Leipoldt, who proposed that “the disability perspective of inter-dependence is a practical guide from the margins to making new choices that may lead to a just and sustainable world – one that reduces the distance between each other and our environment” (2006: 21). If ecocentrism affirms the intrinsic value of life and life’s diversity, then the spatial organization of environments must reflect that value.

Importantly, ecocentric accessibility does not entail the unrestricted presence and inclusion of humans in all spaces: human presence, however inclusive and diverse, can negatively affect nonhuman life and ecological systems at both proximal and distal scales. Ecocentrism’s commitment to the intrinsic value of life in all its diversity, therefore, necessitates that accessibility within an ecocentric framework must be understood as negotiated and ecologically constrained co-presence rather than universal human entitlement to all spaces.

Ecocentrism, accessibility and design

From an ecocentric perspective, built and managed environments should be conceived from the outset as shared habitats in which diverse human and nonhuman beings have a legitimate place. Planning and architectural design must anticipate plural embodiment, appreciate ecological relationships,

acknowledge dependency and foreground the intrinsic value of life in all its embodiments. Within this remedial perspective, accessibility ceases to be an afterthought, it is built into design from the outset. The default presumption is a rich multiplicity of occupants and co-dwellers.

Importantly, on an ecocentric outlook, accessibility cannot be pursued through ecologically destructive construction. This would undermine the spatial injustice that diversity-guided design seeks to achieve. If accessibility is realized through practices that undermine biodiversity and climatic stability, the basic conditions of shared inhabitation are eroded. An ecocentric paradigm therefore binds accessibility to ecological health and sustainability – a joining of values that has some precedent in the ‘Universal Design’ approach (Gossett *et al.*, 2009). Ecologically constrained co-dwelling means that accessibility must be negotiated in the context of ecological limits and the needs of nonhuman life. In some contexts, restricting human presence wholesale may itself be ecologically necessary in order to sustain habitats, species or ecological processes.

An ecocentric paradigm – alive to accessibility understood in intersectional and multispecies terms – would not simply entail that we add accessibility features to existing anthropocentric configurations or practices. It would reorganize priorities and processes. Rather than maximizing circulation, productivity, surveillance and enclosure (from the environment, its entities and rhythms) an ecocentric paradigm would prioritize ecological permeability, multispecies co-existence, sensory diversity, low-impact construction and forms of inhabitation compatible with ecological continuity. Movement flows of multiple forms of embodiment would be presupposed, with standard infrastructural configurations arranged around the normate (able-bodied, human) body being supplanted by arrangements that anticipate multi-body and multi-species presence.

A simple contrast case helps illustrate the difference that an ecocentric paradigm would make. Consider a public library or civic building designed according to conventional design norms that presuppose the normate body: you will see steps at entrances, hard surfaces that amplify noise, bright lighting, large sealed glass façades and climate-controlled interiors that isolate the building from surrounding ecological processes. Accessibility is typically addressed retrospectively through ramps, lifts and designated seating areas. An ecocentric design approach would begin from a different premise – that the building is a site for shared inhabitation among diverse human and nonhuman forms of life. Step-free entrances, quiet rooms, sensory-considerate lighting, ample resting spots, lifts and ramps as defaults (not subsequent additions), would anticipate diverse human embodiments from the outset rather than retrofitting accommodation. At the same time, the building itself would remain ecologically permeable: incorporating nesting spaces, green façades, permeable surfaces and materials chosen for low ecological impact. Outdoor areas would support pollinators and native vegetation, while lighting and glass design would minimize harm to nocturnal species and migrating birds. Rather than isolating human activity from the surrounding environment, the building

would be designed as part of a living ecological fabric. Furthermore, the materials and construction practices would be as environmentally sustainable and non-exploitative as possible. Environmentally consumptive technologies such as air conditioning would be sparingly used, with human comfort being one priority amongst many to be continuously negotiated.

Such a design approach would not eliminate conflict or perfectly satisfy every need, but it would embody a different organizing foundation. Namely, that diverse, multiply embodied forms of life are all legitimate co-inhabitants of shared (built and managed) environments whose needs must be considered from the outset rather than treated as afterthoughts or obstacles, *in tandem with* broader ecological needs and limits. In rejecting the anthropocentric logics, values and assumptions implicated in multiple intersecting spatial injustices – where ableism and speciesism are tangled – the ecocentric perspective would steer us towards a design philosophy that does not build in exclusions from the outset, thus making spatial injustices inevitable, but instead fosters human humility, multispecies inclusivity and diversity, and ecological restraint at each stage of the process.

Ecocentrism implies a different way of arranging built and managed environments, one grounded not in human mastery over space but in ecological interdependence, plural embodiment and negotiated multispecies co-dwelling. Accessibility, interpreted in an intersectional and multispecies manner, therefore emerges not as an optional addition to ecocentric ethics but as one of its core normative implications. To take the intrinsic value of life's diversity seriously is, in part, to take accessibility seriously; and this must be done in a way that foregrounds ecological limits and human humility.

Note

- 1 As a disabled person I feel the need to express caution at drawing overly simplistic symmetries between different forms of exclusion and oppression – particularly where disability and animality are connected, given the damaging historical associations between disabled people and animals that disability activists have worked to deconstruct (Taylor, 2017). With this caveat in mind, this paper nonetheless argues that both disabled people and animals endure spatial injustices and structural exclusions founded in a common anthropocentric cluster of norms, values and expectations.

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