

Naturalised dis/ability and disputed gender in critical places: From social to functional categorisation of public space

Daniel Wojahn¹, Stina Ericsson² & Brian W. King³

¹Södertörn University, ²University of Gothenburg, ³University of Hong Kong

Abstract

In this article, we examine how people experience and discuss public places that categorise users by dis/ability and gender. Adopting a constructionist perspective, we investigate discursive and spatial practices that reproduce or contest categorisations, discriminations, and privilegings. Our analysis focuses on three public debates around disrupted spatial norms: the introduction of ‘all-gender’ toilets in Hong Kong, legal action against women’s parking spaces in Germany, and disputes about the design of bathing facilities in Sweden. The data comprise newspaper articles, online comment threads, blogs, and fieldnotes.

Methodologically, we combine a discourse analytical approach with social semiotics. We study linguistic nominations of people and places and relate them to Hansson’s (2020) notion of ‘critical places’ and Garland-Thomson’s (2011) concept of ‘material anonymity’ to capture how embodied subjects encounter space as enabling or obstructive and excluding. Across the three cases, dis/ability is consistently constructed as a binary categorisation linked to (in)accessibility and treated as largely unproblematic: specially designed spaces for disabled people are presented as necessary and non-controversial. By contrast, gender is debated as a categorisation in itself. Binary gender norms are challenged and defended, and attempts to reconfigure gendered critical places – such as non-gendering toilets, re-signed changing rooms, or women’s parking spaces – elicit confusion, resistance, and hostility.

The article’s core contribution is to show how dis/ability categorisation tends to be naturalised and stabilised, while gender categorisation remains publicly negotiable and intensely contested in public space, and to use this asymmetry to outline possibilities for designing shared spaces organised around functions rather than social categorisations.

Introduction

In this study, we aim to understand how people experience and discuss physical spaces that categorise people via both dis/ability and gender. More specifically, the article examines how disability and gender categorisations are differentially problematised in public debate, arguing that dis/ability categorisation tends to be naturalised and stabilised as a taken-for-granted binary linked to accessibility, whereas gender categorisation remains publicly negotiable and a recurrent object of contestation. Following Goodley (2014, p. xiii), we use the term *dis/ability* to emphasise that “disablism and ableism (and disability and ability) can only ever be understood simultaneously in relation to one another”. Similar to other systems of social categorisation, dis/ability and gender are reproduced through both language and the arrangement of physical space. Spatial segregation regarding dis/ability and gender is practised in most cultures and many aspects of daily life, for instance, when it comes to public toilets, changing rooms, educational settings, sports, housing accommodations or prisons. Thus, in addition to contributing new knowledge on categorisation, dis/ability, and gender, the study’s findings on language use in public life can be applied in a number of different professions, including architects, designers, and city planners.

For the present analysis, we have chosen three distinct yet comparable types of physical spaces encompassing everyday infrastructure for bodily needs, all of which are routinely divided and governed through both dis/ability and gender categorisations: toilets, parking spaces, and bathing facilities. The specific cases that we study are also chosen because they involve disruptions of current understandings of dis/ability and gender in these spaces. By disruption we here mean some form of challenge to or problematisation of dominant societal categorisations. Together, they illustrate different articulations of these categorisations. We focus specifically on the introduction of gender-neutral toilets in Hong Kong where gender separation is explicit and dis/ability is often spatially side-lined, legal action against women-only parking spaces in Germany where dis/ability and gender reservations coexist in different legal and normative regimes, and the arrangement of changing rooms, sauna, and pool at a public outdoor bathing area in Sweden where disability and gender are negotiated through experimental spatial and signage arrangements. The three national contexts have not been chosen to enable a country comparison; rather, a theory-driven, pattern-seeking juxtaposition is enabled, to give a broader understanding of the mechanisms involved in spatial categorisation and its disruption, as *assemblages* that “combine in a regime of signs or a semiotic machine” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 83).

The cases also exemplify diverse modalities of disruption – a student-led redesign of toilet signage in Hong Kong, a court case challenging women’s parking spaces in Germany, and a municipality-driven design experiment at a Swedish bathing facility. This range allows us to trace how similar categorising logics are contested across grassroots intervention, legal action, and urban design practice without claiming national representativeness. By examining diverse contexts in tandem, assemblage combination can be more fully explained, its capacities better understood and more broadly applied.

The disruptions have all generated reactions from the public, which is what has enabled us to investigate people’s spatialised understandings of dis/ability and gender. We consider these understandings to be the results of active social processes. This means that we do not see dis/ability and gender as pre-existing natural categories, of significance prior to human action, but as maintained and made socially relevant through collective acts, in our case through active spatial and discursive divisions of people. To stress the active act of categorisation, we use the term *categorisation* instead of *category* (Hornscheidt, 2007, p. 67). Thus, our study is based on a constructionist understanding of the relation between language and the conceptualisation of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Butler, 1997; Hornscheidt, 2006). Thereby, we also assume that systems of social categorisation are open for challenges, shifts, and changes, as in the disruptions that we investigate.

The overall aim of this study is to investigate how people in the three cases experience and discuss spaces that categorise people by dis/ability and gender. We thereby contribute to research on the role that both physical spaces and language play when it comes to the categorisation of people; categorisations that in turn can lead to discrimination and privileging of groups of people. In addition, we understand the study’s focus on dis/ability and ableism as a way to set a stronger discursive focus on this social categorisation and form of structural discrimination as part of social spatialisation, as dis/ability still is an underexplored topic in discourse analysis (Grue, 2015, p. x).

Critical places, dis/ability and gender

Categorisations and power relations regarding dis/ability and gender are reproduced both spatially and through language, or as Plaskow (2008, p. 55) expresses it: “Just as language is not a neutral tool for communication but reflects

and reinforces gender, race, and class inequalities, so those with the power to define a society's symbolic universe also have the power to create built worlds that represent and promulgate their beliefs and priorities”.

Dis/ability and space have been investigated through different approaches, such as dis/ordered mappings (Rieger et al., 2022) and dis/abling counter/infections (Schillmeier, 2020). In this article, we use Hansson's (2020) notion of 'critical place' as a way of investigating how norms regarding dis/ability are made apparent in relation to space. A critical place involves a disturbance in the ongoing flow of everyday life, which the individual then needs to manage. Examples may include a noisy work environment for a person with a hearing impairment (Alftberg et al., 2016) or a school corridor with poor ventilation for a student with asthma (Hansson, 2007). Thus, a place is critical in relation to an individual's situated, embodied experience, and the same place need not be experienced as critical by everyone. In this sense, critical places can be seen as an illustration of how any space allows for multiple simultaneous understandings (Massey, 2005). Extrapolating from Massey, it can also be argued that any place can be critical for some individual. We draw on Massey's understanding of space as the dynamic, relational configuration of social and material relations, and on Hansson's notion of critical place to highlight how such relations are lived and negotiated in specific locales. In our usage, *space* thus refers to broader spatial arrangements and categorising logics, while *place* designates situated sites (such as toilets, car parks, and bathing facilities) where these logics become experientially salient and potentially critical.

The individual needs to attend to the social practices and relations of the critical place. This involves social risks, such as through an individual's non-compliance with normative expectations (Alftberg et al., 2016). Critical places can be seen as naming a phenomenon that is complementary to Garland-Thomson's (2011) *material anonymity*. This latter notion involves a congruent relationship – a good enough fit – between a body and the world. Material anonymity means that a body satisfies the environment's requirements “in a way so as not to stand out, make a scene, or disrupt through countering expectations” (Garland-Thomson, 2011, p. 596). The built and designed space tends to offer material anonymity to majority forms of embodiment and not to minority forms of embodiment, for example disabled people (Garland-Thomson, 2011). In contrast with *material anonymity*, the concept of *critical places* methodologically points to investigations of disruptions, which we make use of here.

We extend the notion of *critical place* to also include gender. For instance, toilets are prime examples of places that can become critical for non-majority forms of gender embodiment (e.g. Cavanagh, 2010; Huesmann, 2016; Robinson et al., 2025). Thus, we see a critical place as one where an individual, as part of an embodied and situated experience, experiences a disruption of relevance for categorisations of dis/ability and/or gender, and where social practices and relations at the place involve social risks for the individual.

There has been quite extensive research on the role that discourse plays in the social construction of gender and gender roles (e.g. Bucholtz, 2014; Butler, 1993, 1997; Cameron, 1998; Christie, 2000; Hornscheidt, 2006; Makoni, 2023; McElhinney, 2014; Milani, 2015). Regarding dis/ability, the amount of research with a focus on language and discourse is more limited but seems to be increasing (e.g. Bakka & Grue, 2025; Corker & French, 1999; Grue, 2015; Svanelöv et al., 2024; Winance, 2007; Wojahn et al., 2024). For both dis/ability and gender the previous research shows how hierarchies of groups of people are established within these categorisations and how these sub-categorisations usually are based on a binary conceptualisation. Regarding dis/ability, people are grouped into those who are disabled and those who are not, commonly based on essentialist premises and with ableist norms and privileges as a result (e.g. Campbell, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2020). Regarding gender, people are conventionally grouped into women and men, with disregard for, or ignorance of, people physically or socially between or beyond this binary division (e.g. Davis et al., 2014; Hornscheidt, 2012; Konnelly et al., 2022; Mills, 2008).

In this article, we use the terms *disablised* and *ablised* in order to emphasise the active processes involved in categorisation. These terms should be seen as akin to *racialised* and *gendered* in postcolonial, critical whiteness, and critical gender studies (e.g. Butler, 1997; Murji & Solomos, 2004). The notion of *disablised bodies* has previously been used by Campbell (1999, p. 57) in a similar way to locate disability not as a property of bodies but as a result of social power relations that dictate what bodies are expected to be or do and how a built environment reproduces these expectations.

Sub-categorisations of dis/ability and gender are co-constituted and can only be understood in relation to each other (e.g. Butler, 1990; Davis, 2013). And as Goodley (2014, p. 167) states regarding dis/ability: “Each side of the dis/ability divide either brings with it privileged or denounced access to social, cultural and

economic capital”. Thus, dis/ability and gender are intimately tied to power relations.

Dis/ability and gender are also intimately tied to each other. In line with intersectional understandings (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Dietze et al., 2007; Walgenbach et al., 2007) we see dis/ability as always already gendered and gender as always already dis/ablised. For instance, a mention of “women and men” might be accompanied by ableist norms and assumptions of how bodies and minds function (Nario-Redmond, 2020) and a mention of “disabled or non-disabled people” might be accompanied by assumptions of gendered bodies and sexual identities (Hornscheidt, 2012). We separate dis/ability and gender only on an analytical level, from each other and from further socially structuring categorisations, before re-assembling them in the discussion.

The three cases and method

Here we introduce the three cases and give an overview of the material and our method. As explained in the introduction, the three cases have been selected because they involve (i) different types of regulated public spaces, (ii) different articulations of dis/ability and gender categorisations, and (iii) different modalities of disruption.

Public toilet

The majority of previous research on the categorisation of people through physical space focuses on how public toilets reproduce binary gender categorisation. Due to the explicit gender binarity, with separate spaces for “women” and “men”, everyone must align with this categorisation when using a toilet in public (Doan, 2010). How spatial gender categorisation affects trans and non-binary people has been analysed and discussed in several studies (Atherton, 2024; Dunne, 2017; Greed, 2019; Huesmann, 2016; Serlin, 2010). Previous research also shows how self-positionings and perceptions are overridden by others, for example through gender-policing by other toilet users as well as security staff and institutional managers (Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; Robinson et al., 2025).

Typically, accessible toilets reserved for disablised people are separated off from this binary categorisation. They become places where ablised people who are perceived outside of the gender binary, by others and/or self, can find freedom

from scrutiny at least while inside (Browne, 2004). Separate and lockable, such facilities can serve as a queer place of refuge (Doan, 2010). However, this very perception of accessible toilets as genderless perpetuates the perception that disabled people themselves are genderless, and this positioning is resisted in the disabled community as a case of infantilisation (Castrodale & Lane, 2015; Slater et al., 2018; Wiseman, 2019).

For this study, we compiled a corpus concerning gender-neutral public toilets in Hong Kong comprising eight newspaper articles (four in Chinese and four in English – 10,309 words), four personal blog entries (2,936 words) and one public statement taken from the website of a Hong Kong dis/ability awareness organization (360 words). The writing and publication of all the items from the various sources had been stimulated, either directly or indirectly, by the much-publicised addition of an ‘all-gender’ toilet at the University of Hong Kong in 2016 and subsequent discussions of proposed policy changes to public toilet signage in the city. All items in the corpus were published in 2016–2017.

Parking spaces

Our second case concerns categorisation through parking spaces. Parking spaces specifically reserved for women were introduced in Germany in the late 1980s to create safer public spaces for women. Their introduction was a result of extensive public discussions on gender-specific experiences of fear and insecurity in public space due to men’s sexual violence (Becker, 2008; Ruhne, 2011, 2020). Women’s parking spaces are usually located close to the exit of a parking garage or near the entry to a building, well-lit and often monitored by a car park attendant or by video surveillance.

Specific parking spaces reserved for disabled people have a long tradition in the German, and other countries’, traffic regulations. They are wider than the average parking space to allow for easy access. Just like parking spaces for women, they are located beside building entrances. They should be placed on a flat area and provide an accessible route to, for instance, the building entrance. Parking spaces for disabled people are, unlike the ones reserved for women, statutory throughout Germany.

In January 2019, a male law student took legal action against a Bavarian town because he considered parking spaces reserved for women to be discriminatory against men. The claimant and the town finally agreed on a modified signposting,

changing the mandatory wording “Only for women” (Ger. *Nur für Frauen*) into a recommendation, “Women - please keep free” (Ger. *Frauen - Bitte freihalten*).

We compiled a corpus containing 13 German newspaper articles (8,140 words) and seven discussion threads (897 entries, 45,346 words) on women’s parking spaces. The newspaper articles were all about the mentioned case and published in January 2019. The entries in the discussion threads were published in January 2019 on the newspaper’s websites after some of the articles. We also compiled a corpus with discussions on parking spaces reserved for disabled people, which includes five newspaper articles (2,723 words) and three discussion threads (561 entries, 28,343 words) from 2019 and 2021. We included local and national newspapers representing a broad political spectrum.

Bathing facilities

Bathing facilities can be highly regulated spaces regarding who can move where, with separate changing areas and saunas reserved for different genders or different abilities, much in the same way as toilets (Doan, 2010). Entering and exiting swimming pools are other examples where categorisation is made relevant, through the design and presence or non-presence of devices such as ladders, slopes and ramps, lifts, stairs, and trampolines.

The bathing facilities we are focusing on in this study are located at the Jubilee Park (Swe. *Jubileumsparken*) in Gothenburg, Sweden. The park opened in February 2015 and is placed by a river in a disused industrial part of the city. The bathing facilities are free of charge. The park has been developed by the City of Gothenburg as “a meeting place for all” (goteborg.com, n.d.). As part of this, the park hosts an association for the everyday empowerment of disabled children and young adults, and an intersectional and queer-feminist approach to urban development processes has been used. As shown by Sandström (2019), the design strategies behind the Jubilee Park involve the rapid testing of new non-permanent ideas, partly as a way to influence public opinion.

We compiled a set of seven newspaper articles (1,646 words) by using the media database *Retriever*. The articles were published in 2015–2021 and were found through the search terms *Jubileumsparken* (‘Jubilee Park’) and *Frihamnen* (‘Free Harbour’), both terms referring to the place where the bathing facilities are located. The seven articles contain people’s reactions to the bathing facilities, and these reactions are connected to categorisations of people regarding either

dis/ability or gender, or both. We have also collected material in the form of web pages by disability rights organisations and the City of Gothenburg, Facebook posts, and our own visit to the facilities, documented through photos and notes.

Method

The approach to analysis taken in this study fits within a broad definition of critical discourse studies (CDS). We understand discourse not only as spoken or written language but as encompassing a wider set of semiotic resources through which social relations and power are negotiated (Wodak & Meyer, 2016; Zebracki & Milani, 2017). We focus on an analysis of semiotic resources that genderise and/or dis/ablise people and spaces. Thus, we study meaning-making practices through which categorisations, discriminations, and privilegings are reproduced or contested.

Following the constructionist framework outlined above, we understand dis/ability and gender as constituted through ongoing social, discursive, and material practices (Butler, 1993; Goodley, 2014). Methodologically, this means that we treat subjects' positions (e.g. disabled or non-disabled people, women or men) and critical places (e.g. women's parking spaces, gender-neutral toilets) as outcomes of categorising practices that can be traced in language and other semiotic forms. Drawing on social semiotics and spatial discourse studies (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Zebracki & Milani, 2017), we also examine the built environment and its signage as meaning-making resources that participate in these categorisations alongside verbal language.

We study the categorisations made in the built environment mainly through focusing on discourse about space. As described above, we therefore compiled three corpora of naturally occurring public discourse triggered by concrete disruptions of established spatial categorisations. These disruptions made norms around dis/ability and gender particularly salient, and we sought to capture the most intensive periods of public debate.

Analytically, we conducted close readings of each corpus to identify passages where dis/ability and/or gender were explicitly linked to space. We coded linguistic nominations of people (e.g. 'wheelchair users', 'walkers') and places (e.g. 'disabled parking spaces') as well as explicit evaluative framings of these places (e.g. 'necessary', 'discriminatory', 'inclusive') and recurring argumentative patterns (e.g. 'disabled parking spaces must be kept free'). These analytical steps

correspond to Reisigl and Wodak's (2016, pp. 32–33) discursive strategies of *nomination*, *predication*, and *argumentation*.

To capture the spatial dimension, we interpreted these findings through Hansson's (2020) notion of *critical places* and Garland-Thomson's (2011) concept of *material anonymity*, identifying instances where people described disruptions arising from the interaction of embodied positions and spatial arrangements. We then examined how these accounts categorised people, spaces and places as fitting, or not fitting, particular bodies.

Finally, we compared tendencies across the three cases to identify recurrent patterns, focusing on how the binary divisions central to our study were reproduced or challenged, how intersections of dis/ability and gender were made relevant, and how different actors positioned themselves and others in relation to the spaces and places under discussion.

Analysis

We analyse people's experiences and understandings of spaces as they analytically emerge as critical places, beginning with dis/ability, and then gender.

Categorisations by dis/ability

When space is discussed in relation to dis/ability in the material, many debaters focus on the creation of spaces that specifically are reserved for disabled people (e.g. parking spaces, toilets). This spatial categorisation is done in a binary way and those who are included in the group entitled to use the reserved spaces are, in our material, usually discursively categorised as “disabled people” (Chin. 部殘疾人士, Ger. *Behinderte*) or “wheelchair users” (Chin. 輪椅使用者, Ger. *Rollstuhlfahrer*). Those who are not entitled to use the reserved spaces, that is disabled people, are mostly not named at all, but sometimes called “non-disabled people” (Chin. 非殘疾人士, Ger. *Nichtbehinderte*), “walkers” (Ger. *Fußgänger*) or described as “everyone else” (Ger. *alle anderen*). In the Swedish bathing facility material, no spaces are discussed as reserved exclusively for disabled people.

The existence of spaces specifically reserved for disabled people is throughout our whole material never questioned. As an example of comments that highlight the need for spaces reserved for disabled people, one author writes in a

comment to a newspaper article (throughout this article, translations into English have been made by us):

If you, as a disabled person, need a parking space, you depend on the existing disabled parking spaces (width, lowered kerb, proximity to the entrance, etc.). You cannot just take any other parking space like everyone else. That is exactly why there must be many disabled parking spaces, and they must be kept free.

Wenn Sie als Behinderter einen Parkplatz brauchen, sind Sie auf die vorhandenen Behindertenparkplätze angewiesen (Breite, abgesenkter Bordsteinrand, Nähe zum Eingang etc.). Sie können nicht mal eben einen anderen Parkplatz nehmen wie alle anderen. Genau deshalb muss es viele Behindertenparkplätze geben und sie müssen frei sein. (*Zeit Online*, 18/08/2019, <https://www.zeit.de/mobilitaet/2019-08/verkehrsrecht-behindertenparkplaetze-rechtsverstoss-abschleppen>)

In this comment, the author contrasts “disabled person(s)” with “everyone else” and specifies the different requirements that these two groups have for parking spaces. Similar to this author, many debaters describe parking spaces and toilets that are reserved for disabled people as necessary because they create accessibility for a group of people who otherwise would be excluded by an inaccessible environment. Both parking spaces and toilets can be understood as potentially critical places, particularly for people using wheelchairs, and debaters list architectural features that make these places accessible and therewith reduce their critical potential (e.g. dropped kerbs, adequate space for wheelchairs).

A central topic in the discussions is disabled people who create inaccessibility for disabled people, as in the following example:

As a frequent user of disabled parking spaces, it is really annoying when the spaces are occupied. We do not use the parking space for fun. They are often necessary in order to get the wheelchair out of the car. The normal parking spaces are simply too narrow. [...] But they [“disabled parking spaces”] are usually blocked by walkers. Am I not supposed to get annoyed? But I do. I also have to get to work, get things done, and I am stressed too.

Als eifriger Nutzer von Behindertenparkplätzen ist es wirklich nervig wenn die Plätze belegt sind. Wir nutzen den Parkplatz ja nicht aus Spaß. Sie sind oftmals notwendig um den Rollstuhl aus dem Auto zu bekommen. Die normalen Parkplätze sind einfach zu eng. [...] Nur die [„Behindertenparkplätze“] sind in der Regel von Fußgängern zugeparkt. Da soll ich mich nicht aufregen? Doch tue ich. Auch ich muss zur Arbeit kommen, Dinge nebenher erledigen und bin im Stress. (*Zeit Online*, 18/08/2019, <https://www.zeit.de/mobilitaet/2019-08/verkehrsrecht-behindertenparkplaetze-rechtsverstoss-abschleppen>)

The author chooses to label the two groups he is talking about according to the way they move in the built environment (“wheelchair users”, “walkers”) and calls the parking spaces intended for these two groups “disabled” and “normal”, whereby a distinction in “normality” and “deviation” is reproduced. Here, it is not only the built environment that is experienced as critical through its design, but the place becomes a critical place for the author through how people who are able to walk use it.

Regarding parking spaces and toilets, there is a common and never questioned, understanding that physically disabled people, usually portrayed as “wheelchair users”, need special spatial solutions. It is often pointed out that accessible places are not demanded “for fun”, as expressed in the last-mentioned quote, but that they are necessary.

In the discussions on the Swedish bathing facilities, debaters are primarily focussing on (in)accessibility, when talking about dis/ability. The following quote is taken from a letter to the editor and concerns an elevator to the sauna:

Also, an elevator that wasn’t working, which made some of my acquaintances who find it hard to walk, give up.

Dessutom en hiss som inte fungerar vilket gjorde att några i min bekantskapskrets som har svårt att gå gav upp. (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 22/11/2015)

In this extract, the bathing facilities become a critical place for those “who find it hard to walk”. Thus, the built environment can be seen as categorising people into those who do and those who do not have walking difficulties. Besides stairs and gangways, pools and narrow changing rooms come across as potentially critical places for people using wheelchairs, but in our material, they are often construed as non-critical due to the accessible design of the facilities. As an example, a local politician and former Paralympic swimmer is quoted as saying:

[...] everyone with different kinds of disabilities can take part and participate on equal terms. It’s a great facility with good opportunities for those in a wheelchair to change clothes and a lift if you can’t climb into and out of the pool.

[...] alla med olika typer av funktionshinder kan vara med och delta på samma villkor. Detta är en jättefin anläggning med bra möjligheter för de i rullstol att byta om och en lift om du inte kan klättra upp och ner ur bassängen. (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 07/05/2017)

Lifts, ramps as well as changing rooms and toilets with adequate space for manual and power wheelchairs are pointed out as examples of architectural features that support accessibility.

As stated in the quote above, accessible design is regarded as enabling “everyone” to “take part and participate on equal terms”. In other words, accessible design is understood as something that prevents the built environment from excluding people through its inaccessibility.

To sum up, in our material, dis/ability can be understood as a binary social categorisation with the two mutually exclusive subcategories “disablised people” and “ablised people”. Categorisation itself is never an issue in the discussions, and the binary division itself is neither questioned nor actively defended. The physical environment is described as central when it comes to categorisations by dis/ability, with dis/ability being discussed in relation to the accessibility or inaccessibility of specific places. Specific spaces are described as accessible or inaccessible and therewith as including or excluding disablised people. In other words, spaces are considered to categorise people by dis/ability through the (in)accessibility of the space.

Categorisations by gender

When public spaces are discussed in relation to gender in the material, several factors are described as categorising: the physical environment (through the creation of spaces reserved for specific gender groups, e.g. toilets, changing rooms), signs and symbols that designate these gender-segregated spaces (e.g. pictograms on toilet doors), and other users (e.g. through gazes and comments). Some debaters also point out that these three factors force users to categorise themselves, for example through the necessity to choose a toilet or changing room that is reserved for a specific gender group.

The discussions on gender, space and place centre to a great extent on the gender binary. The changing rooms at the Swedish bathing facilities and the gender-neutral toilets in Hong Kong represent two different attempts to disrupt the norm to organise these spaces in line with a binary gender concept. In both cases, the initiators of the disruptions describe the spatially reproduced gender binary as problematic or discriminating.

Regarding the bathing facilities, a representative of the City of Gothenburg states that the aim has been to create an “including place” where “more categories than SHE and HE have a right to move and be in the communal rooms that the city builds” (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 13/10/2017, capital letters in the original). As one step towards a place that includes “more categories than SHE and HE” the two changing rooms are designated as “she/they” (Swe. *hon/ben*) and “he/they” (Swe. *han/ben*), respectively. The signs also include explanatory texts, stating that visitors identifying as “she” or “he”, should use the “she” and “he” changing rooms, respectively, whereas visitors who identify as neither “she” nor “he” should choose “they”.

In contrast, the students in Hong Kong disrupt gender binary norms by creating a fully non-gendering place. They redesignate toilets with rainbow-coloured pictograms showing three persons holding hands, one in trousers, one in a dress, and, in the middle, one half dressed in trousers and half in a dress. The signs also state “This toilet is for everyone”, in both English and Cantonese. By creating a non-gendering space, a physical space “for everyone”, they create a critical place that is potentially non-categorising, at least by gender.

Some of the debaters who are positive about the redesignation of the toilets point out that non-gendering spaces also can prevent users from categorising each other, for instance, through their gazes or comments. The interviewee in the following quote describes the feeling of getting categorised through another person’s gaze when being in gendered spaces:

“There are far more transgender people than the official number because many of us, like me, don’t go to see a doctor,” said Helen Lau [pseudonym], a transgender woman who has not come out yet. Lau said she usually goes to the men’s room despite dressing [as a woman], but once a man came into the toilet and checked the sign again after seeing her inside, which made her feel embarrassed. “I really want Hong Kong to build more gender-neutral toilets [...],” she added. (*Journalism and Media Studies Centre Online Magazine* 2018)

This quote shows the complexity of spatial gender categorisation. The creation of gendered spaces in the built environment forces users to adapt themselves to these spatial categorisations. The interviewee and the man coming into the toilet interact with the spatial categorisations and with each other to negotiate which category of people this specific space is intended for. This act could, according to the interviewee, be avoided with non-gendering spaces. The quote also shows

that getting categorised by others causes uncomfortable feelings, even without intended or explicit discriminations.

All in all, the quote reveals that gendering toilets are potential critical places for the interviewee because of the spatial gender categorisation, other users' reactions as well as the necessity to adapt oneself to the given spatial categorisations.

The redesignations of both the changing rooms and the toilets elicit broad public reactions in the form of newspaper articles, letters to the editor, social media posts etc. Some are positive, some negative, and others illustrate that disruptions of established gender categorisations are experienced as confusing.

In the case of the bathing facilities, it is particularly the fact that two changing rooms are provided for three gender categories that debaters react to. Regarding the signs on the doors to the changing rooms, one debater writes:

If it's the case that one wants to dissolve the idea of two genders, shouldn't there be a single changing room for only THEY? Or does one want to give the bathers freedom to choose their own gender identity? But in that case, shouldn't there be three changing rooms? One for SHE, one for HE and one for THEY?

Om det är så att man vill lösa upp den tvåkönade föreställningen, borde man inte då ha ett enda omklädningsrum upplåtet för endast HEN? Eller vill man ge badgästerna frihet att själva välja genusidentitet? Men i så fall skulle man väl ha tre omklädningsrum? Ett för HON, ett för HAN och ett för HEN? (*Göteborgs-Posten*, 10/10/2017)

As in this quote, debaters often question how more than two genders should interact with the built environment. The debater argues that a conception of gender as a three-way "she/he/they" is not congruent with two physical changing rooms, suggesting, instead, either three changing rooms, one for each of three categories "she", "he", and "they", or a single changing room whereby "they" is to accommodate all users.

Other reactions are harsher and express transphobic defences of a binary gender concept. For example, the bathing facilities' Facebook account announces during spring 2020 that someone has torn down the signs and scribbled "There are only two genders" (Swe. *Det finns bara två kön*) on the doors (<https://www.facebook.com/jubileumsparken>, 06/04/2020). A further example occurred during our visit to the facilities when one visitor was commenting on the signs by saying "If you don't know what's between your legs you shouldn't

fucking come here!” (Swe. *Om du inte vet vad du har mellan benen ska du fan inte komma hit!*). The comment was addressed to the person accompanying them but spoken loud enough to be heard by other visitors. Through the semantic content of these comments, they pinpoint in what way the bathing facilities can be a critical place for someone who does not conform to a binary gender concept. As social actions, they produce the space as a critical place for others. The non-gendering toilets in Hong Kong provoke similar reactions, defending a binary view of gender.

While debaters who react to the redesignation of toilets and changing rooms often call for a categorisation of space following a binary gender concept, gender as a space-organising category is many times disliked when it comes to parking spaces. Many debaters state that parking spaces reserved for a specific gender should be “illegal”.

The discussions of parking spaces focus largely on the hierarchical relation between the two subcategories “women” and “men”. Debaters who argue against women’s parking spaces assume that these are the result of societal discrimination against men: “Parking spaces for women only are discriminatory!”, “gender equality must not include special treatment”. Frequently quoted is also the following adaption of a feminist slogan: “Equal rights for men and women!”. All these comments are based on the assumption that spaces specifically reserved for women disadvantage men. In addition, some men declare that they consciously park their cars on spaces reserved for women. They describe this as a form of resistance to the perceived discrimination against men.

However, other debaters, both positioned as women and men, state that a spatial arrangement of car parks based on gender “unfortunately” is necessary. The necessity of women’s parking spaces is usually motivated with safety arguments. Some women describe how they experience car parks as unsafe places, especially at night. Specific places reserved for women, well-lit and easy to reach, create a “feeling of security”. The threat is said to come from male strangers.

To sum up, the discussions on gender, space and place focus on two aspects of gender categorisation. On the one hand, the binary gender concept itself is challenged and defended, and, on the other hand, power relations *within* the binary concept are discussed. The discussions show that changing rooms and toilets are described as spaces that can be critical places for users who do not align themselves to a binary gender concept, while dark car parks are described

as potentially critical places for female users. Gendering and non-gendering spaces in the built environment cause broad discussions in which categorisation itself is the central topic. Gender is, in contrast to dis/ability, broadly discussed as a system of social categorisation in all three cases.

Concluding discussion

Public spaces are places where people encounter one another. Users of public spaces are exposed to each other's presence, which means that they not only have to interact with the built environment but also with each other. The spaces we have chosen for this study – toilets, bathing facilities, and car parks – are, in addition, examples of public spaces that usually are divided into sections reserved for specific groups of people. This means that there are conventions for which users are allowed to be where in these spaces, depending on how they are being dis/abled and/or gendered.

In this study, we have focused on how users of these spaces experience and discuss spatial categorisations by dis/ability and gender. Our analysis demonstrates an asymmetry in contestation that can be summarised in three key insights: the naturalisation of ableist norms, the negotiability of gender categorisation, and the possibilities of designing function-based spaces. While dis/ability is connected to accessibility, and disability categorisation is largely naturalised and stabilised as an unproblematic binary, gender categorisation is publicly negotiable and repeatedly contested, with binary norms challenged and defended in debates about who should use which spaces. This finding resonates with earlier work showing that dis/ability tends to be essentialised and treated as a stable attribute (Campbell, 2009; Nario-Redmond, 2020), while gender is continuously re-enacted and in certain situations socially contested (Butler, 1990; Bucholtz, 2014). For dis/ability, there is no problematisation of a binary division between, say, *disabled* and *non-disabled*, nor of categorisations that contest that binary. Rather, dis/ability is linked to the material conditions of accessibility, so that categorisations of dis/ability are closely connected with the built environment (Garland-Thomson, 2011; Goodley, 2014), and not primarily with signage or categorisations done by other users. By contrast, when it comes to gender, it is categorisation itself that is at issue, mainly in terms of challenges and defences of a binary gender concept. Regarding gender, it is not only the built environment that is discussed as categorising but also signs and pictograms (e.g. on toilet and changing room doors) and other people (e.g. through gazes and

comments). This aligns with earlier research on gender-policing in public spaces (Browne, 2004; Doan, 2010; Huesmann, 2016).

These differences regarding how dis/ability and gender are conceptualised also mean that gender is construed as a categorisation that concerns everyone, whereas dis/ability, through its connection to accessibility, is construed as concerning only a subset of people. This, we argue, means that the ablistation that is done by the built environment, signage, and other people's actions with regard to majority forms of embodiment remains invisible. In discourse-analytical terms, our notion of critical places, read against Garland-Thomson's (2011) material anonymity, foregrounds how ableist norms are naturalised and how ablist bodies come to appear unmarked and space-fitting, while disabled bodies are rendered hypervisible at moments of spatial misfit. This insight extends earlier understandings of how spatial arrangements reproduce normative embodiments (Massey, 2005; Schillmeier, 2020), demonstrating empirically how the built environment and discursive reactions co-produce these norms in everyday settings. This, in turn, conceals the privileging that is taking place and shows how normative hierarchies are socially constructed and continually reproduced not only in discourse but also in the built environment.

Following on from this, disruptions of ability norms, such as specifically designed spaces that are reserved for disabled people (e.g. accessible toilets, parking spaces or swimming pools), come across as positive, desirable, and inoffensive. In stark contrast, disruptions of gender norms, such as non-gendering toilets, women's parking spaces or changing room signage that challenges the gender binary, elicit critical and outright hostile reactions. The negotiability of gender categorisation thus becomes visible in the intensity with which boundaries are drawn and redrawn in language, signage and interaction. Our cases show how gendered spatial arrangements are discursively framed as either common sense or as disruptions of established norms, and how this is closely connected to cisnormative and heteronormative assumptions about bodies, safety and standards of acceptable behaviour (Cavanagh, 2010; Makoni, 2023; Milani, 2015). In so doing, the analysis contributes to critical gender studies on space and place by demonstrating how gender is made into an object of public negotiation not only by activists but also in comment threads and everyday interactions.

On the one hand, making public spaces non-critical for more people with regard to categorisations of dis/ability is seen as unproblematic and even irrelevant for

privileged abled positions, and problematic for discriminated positions when accessibility has not been achieved. On the other hand, making shared spaces non-critical for more people with regard to gender is seen as affecting and threatening privileged positions, both cis-gendered and male positions. This asymmetry, we suggest, is important for critical discourse studies and critical disability studies alike: it shows that not all systems of categorisation are equally open to contestation, and that calls for *inclusion* can simultaneously stabilise some binaries (dis/ability) while destabilising others (gender). Our findings thereby complement intersectional accounts of how social categorisations co-constitute one another (Hornscheidt, 2007; Walgenbach et al., 2007), while also extending scholarship on space and discourse by demonstrating how disruptions are negotiated in relation to different categorising systems (Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Zebracki & Milani, 2017).

Taken together, these findings suggest that rethinking public space around functions rather than social categorisations offers one way of addressing this asymmetrical contestation. From time to time, debaters bring up alternative future ways to organise shared spaces. Some express a wish for spaces that do not reproduce a division of people in accordance with existing, and potentially discriminating, systems of social categorisation. For example, changing rooms or universally accessible toilets for everyone are proposed, or parking spaces where everyone feels safe. In this way, our study points towards a solution that dispenses with categorisations of people in favour of categorisations of functions. This echoes broader arguments in critical design studies about shifting attention from “users” as social types to practices and embodied needs (Sandström, 2019). As an example, this may include categorising “toilet with armrest”, “toilet without armrest” and “urinal” instead of categorising people, leaving each individual to decide for themselves which space to use (see Hedvall et al., 2022 for a development of this argument). It may also involve designing changing rooms and parking areas in ways that promote comfort and security for all. For critical disability and gender studies on space, these proposals invite further exploration of how function-based design might be implemented without reproducing ableist or cisnormative assumptions about which bodies count as “standard”, and how notions such as critical places can inform more reflexive, intersectional approaches to planning and architecture. For critical discourse studies, our analysis underscores the need to study how particular spatial orders are justified, and how alternative imaginaries of function-based, non-categorising spaces can be articulated, contested and potentially materialised. For it is one thing to change

a sign on the wall and entirely another to think more expansively about how we design built environments in the first place.

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Kontakt

Daniel Wojahn

daniel.wojahn@sh.se

Stina Ericsson

stina.ericsson@svenska.gu.se

Brian W. King

bwking@hku.hk