**Down to the Struts**

Season 2, Episode 2: Critical Design in the Age of COVID

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**Introduction**

[jazzy piano chords, bass strumming with smooth R&B]

Qudsiya Naqui

Hi, this is Qudsiya Naqui and welcome to another episode of down to the struts. Today we'll listen in on my conversation with Aimi Hamraie. Amy is a professor of medicine, health society and American Studies at Vanderbilt University. They also direct the critical Design Lab. As we begin to imagine a future beyond the coronavirus pandemic, Aimi and I had the opportunity to reflect back on the role that technology has played during this time of social distancing and isolation. Its particular impact on disabled people, and how we might reimagine the ways in which we communicate, work and play moving forward. This was a wide ranging conversation, and I hope you find it as illuminating as I did. Okay, let's get down to it.

Qudsiya Naqui

Well, thank you so much, Aimi, for joining me today on down to the struts. I'd love it if you could introduce yourself. And tell us a little bit about your background. And what led you to direct the critical Design Lab at Vanderbilt?

Aimi Hamraie

Sure, thank you so much for having me. My name is Aimi Hamraie, I use they them pronouns. I am an Associate Professor of Medicine, Health and Society at Vanderbilt, where I also direct the critical Design Lab and I am a disability studies scholar. My work focuses on accessibility and universal design. And I wrote a book called Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability, which was published in 2017. So the way that I came to direct the critical Design Lab, first, I should say what the lab is, we are a multi institutional collaborative of disabled designers and design researchers, and also non disabled allies. And we work on issues of disability design and technology from the perspective of disability culture. And that's our critical perspective. So we're thinking about technology not as like a functional fix for disability, but all the different ways that disabled people use technology to connect and to create art and to navigate the built environment.

The lab came out of a project that started in 2014, which was really in my first year at Vanderbilt. It was my second semester, and we were working on accessibility mapping because the university didn't have its own accessibility maps. And there was an ice storm and we were trying to have a disability studies event and there was no information about accessible parking. So from that grew first a project called Mapping Access that was really asking questions about who gets to access University spaces, and what sorts of questions do people ask about accessibility in university spaces who gets left out of how we typically think of like Ada accommodations, and then the lab also just started to admit people from other places other than Vanderbilt as well. And we grew and became like a space for thinking and questioning and designing and building kind of like all over North America and Europe. And we do, you know, many different kinds of projects. We host dance parties, we are building some online archives, we're curating some art exhibits, and there are design considerations and all of these and of course, we also have a podcast that's called [Contra](https://www.mapping-access.com/podcast), which I host that's on disability and design.

Qudsiya Naqui

Thanks for that introduction, Aimi. And I will highly recommend the Contra podcast. I'm an avid listener and encourage all of the listeners of this podcast to definitely check it out. I've definitely learned a lot from it. And I appreciate that this project started with trying to map access on a college campus. I remember being a disabled student and having disability service services and accessibility services be a primary driving force for my selection of a college. And I often found a lot of those offices or those services to be sort of not very holistic, and, you know, not always meeting all the needs of the variety of people that might need access to different things. So I think it's great that you built that from the university and college kind of framework.

So, in looking at your website, I noticed that you talk about your socio spatial practice, can you tell me a little bit about what you mean by socio spatial?

Aimi Hamraie

Socio spatial is a kind of hybrid term that I use to do a few different things. One is to point out that scholarship, like scholarly work around accessibility has a component that's focused on people just the socio part like the social and also a component that's focused on space and the built environment. And that's the spatial part. And there's a specific reason why I put those two together, which is that my work encompasses both writing and design and a set of strategies that come from what we would think of as kind of like, performance art, and also architecture. So in art practice, there's this concept of social practice, which is basically when artists use methods that derive from social science and community engagement to make interventions into the world. So they may design some sort of like interactive event, or they may stage an intervention into public space. And a lot of that kind of work is really informing what we do in the lab and my own design practice as well.

And there's a similar concept in architecture of spatial practice as not just the building of buildings, but the ways that we create spaces and objects like design objects, that call into question norms that exist and sort of disrupt life as we know it in some way. So in both art and architecture, these concepts of spatial practice and social practice are critical ideas, they are a set of methods for going in, and like disrupting the way that people usually think about things. And another term for this in the design world is critical design, which is design that's not just functional. It's not just stuff that we use, it's also asking us to think of different questions and to look at the things that we've taken for granted and ask how we can imagine and understand them differently. And so when I use socio spatial practice, on my website, part of what I'm doing there is showing people that the work of a scholar is also to make things and to change material things in the world, in addition to writing and talking and teaching and those kinds of things.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's great. So it's your sort of tangible role in the physical world and the built environment, as well as your role as sort of an educator melding together. That's really that's really, really interesting. And it's a perfect segue into the the meat of our conversation today, which will focus on access during the pandemic, I think that the concept of critical design has really come into play for everyone who is experiencing the pandemic, particularly with respect to technology and having to find totally new ways to communicate, to educate, to work, to be entertained, when this this event has kind of disrupted our normal way of doing all of those things. And, in particular, I think that technology has transformed the lives of disabled people during the pandemic, in that it has allowed people access they wouldn't have had otherwise. But from your perspective and your socio spatial practice and your study of critical design, I would be interested to hear your thoughts about what had sort of the benefits of that been for disabled people in particular, and maybe also perhaps, what some of the barriers have been during the pandemic.

Aimi Hamraie

Such a great question, and I think this is a good time for us to be reflecting on it. Because, you know, we're recording this right now in December. So the pandemic in the United States at least has been going on since March Arduino. So you know, the first thing I'll say is that a lot of the technologies that people have become reliant on in the US probably like throughout North America and other places is these you know, technologies of remote participation. So things like video conferencing, telephone, all sorts of like apps that let you connect with other people. A lot of these tools and methods are things that we've been using in disability activism and disability community for a long time internally. So it's part of disability culture for people to FaceTime, or have a zoom meeting, or to have an option for like a hybrid meeting, I can't even think of how many times over the last 10 or 15 years have been at disability activist meeting where we've also had a live stream, for example. And so using technology remotely to participate is something that some of us, not everyone, but some of us are pretty comfortable doing. And like in my work, and in my teaching, thinking about accessibility, like, my transition to teaching online was not super onerous, because I'd already built out courses with accessibility embedded in the course management software. So I didn't need to like, go back and learn how to caption videos and that sort of thing, because they're already there, my lab, because it's people kind of joining from like six or seven different time zones, like we all are stuff online. So just kept doing that.

But at the same time, there's a number of justice centered questions that we have to address, because the opportunity and ability to access things remotely is often denied to many of us. So for years and years and years, people have been requesting to, you know, instead of coming to a conference in person, because conferences are really expensive, they're very inaccessible. There are sometimes like exposures that people don't have, or they can't be around other people because they're chronically ill, or have environmental sickness. And like, you know, those requests have often been denied. And usually we hear things like, you know, the internet's not strong enough, or whatever, like, we can zoom people in. We don't know how to do that we don't have the right technology. And so there was a hashtag. In the early part of the pandemic, it was hashtag accessibility for abled, which was putting out all the ways that when non disabled people suddenly decided that, you know, life itself depended on participating remotely and doing work remotely and stuff that it like, you know, it felt like within a matter of weeks, everyone had figured it out technologically. And so those feasibility arguments were not as good anymore.

But you know, in many cases, people were sort of like reinventing the wheel or figuring things out for the first time, that disabled people that already figured it out. And that that's not to say that there are not also technological barriers that have increased. There's this thing that Lewis Mumford says about technology, or, you know, he's describing like the ambivalence of the machine that technology can both like, liberate us, and it can kind of like, trap us, constrain us. And that's because it's a thing that you know, people have designed and it's not always designed that keeps everybody in mind. And so teaching online, for example, enables me to not get sick and get exposed to COVID, which is a very important baseline thing, and also doing it within the amount that I've been doing it and the amount of screen time that I have is like exacerbating my migraines, and it's like, really hard to pay attention for that long. That doesn't mean that it's bad to participate remotely, or that we shouldn't have remote participation. What it means is that we all have to be actively involved and constantly designing new ways of doing things and doing them creatively.

As an example, in my lab, we host a kind of quarterly dance party called remote access. And the first one we had was in March. And the purpose of this gathering, which happens on zoom is to use all of the tools and skills of disability culture for social connection and celebration. And this is different than like being on zoom all day for work. If you were to go to a party, outside of the digital space, you would, you know, maybe you'd like there'd be music or there'd be dancing and snacks and food and you'd go into a corner and chat with someone. And those are types of activities that are expected when you're in person. But like in a virtual space, there are all sorts of other ways that we can invent to interact with each other and so When you come to a remote access dance party, there's stuff happening on the screen, there's an artist showing their work on the screen. And then there's like, a line that you can tap into and hear the image descriptions. And there's like a live chat, where people are interacting and then kind of back channeling each other. They're also doing image descriptions or sound descriptions, there is a DJ, there are people talking, there are people showing their outfits and image describing themselves. Like, all of these things are happening using practices that come from like blind and deaf communities. There's ASL interpretation, there's live captioning, that is like what we do in order to celebrate and party together. And so it's kind of aestheticizing these practices that otherwise seem to have a very functional purpose. And I'm you know, I'm kind of watching and archiving the ways that people are coming up with to do things like this, like really innovative classroom strategies for teaching online or figuring out ways to like help students feel connected to you, even though you're so far away from each other, and build community in the classroom and those sorts of things.

We just got a grant to build like an online like a digital archive of remote participation, which we'll start we'll be working on in 2021. And the idea behind that is to document all the ways that disabled people used technology for remote access before and during the pandemic, thinking even beyond zoom and stuff like that. I'm thinking like, how did people use email newsletters, or print newsletters or correspondence courses, or phone trees, like all of these things were ways of using technology to connect remotely. And it does seem like people who are having kind of an easier time with, like the social isolation of the pandemic often have, like exposure to communities where those types of uses were already happening.

Qudsiya Naqui

That's great. I really love the remote access dance party, you've inspired me to try to have one myself, that sounds so fun. So one of the things I have observed as well, as you know, the pandemic began and everything, everyone was kind of scrambling to move everything online, some things have are developing or have developed, and there was a kind of an access journey.

So for example, my office was using some types of technology at work that weren't perfectly accessible. So I am blind, and I'm a screen reader user. And there were lots of glitches and things weren't working. And but I felt that my battle, which, you know, as disabled people, we often are fighting all the time to make things more accessible, you know, there became a greater imperative to make sure it was accessible because I needed it to do work, but really brought to the fore for me the fact that access is not always baked in, I think zoom is a good example of access being better baked in, I think, then some other platforms or things I was using.

And then I was recently reading for another example, this article in wired about proximity chatting, which is this idea of trying to simulate that what you were describing about the kind of cocktail party feel of a gathering where you can move between tables. So in these proximity chat apps, Gather is an example of one, you have an avatar and you kind of move around this room, and you can go from here to there. And the article didn't mention whether the technology was accessible or what accessibility features it had at all, it wasn't part of that conversation. And I actually had the opportunity to attend an event using this type of platform. And I was as a blind person, I was very lost. Because it's a bit visual. And there wasn't, I wasn't really sure how to navigate in that environment, like I felt like it was it was actually making virtual, all of the things that are hard for a blind person at a cocktail party, in other words, so I'm curious to get your thoughts about that. And I think that it's safe to say a lot of these tools that we're using to connect now in the pandemic are here to stay that for better and also for worse, they're there but what do you think is the best approach to having this holistic concept of access being built in from the beginning and making it kind of part of the conversation?

Aimi Hamraie

Such a great question, and I think that this is an issue where like the pandemic has really like highlighted and exacerbated many of them. Any qualities that existed before, right? And we, we find that in all sorts of spheres in addition to the digital. So you know, I'll say that like digital, like the design of digital tools and products, that is a field where, on the one hand, you have lots of people who are concerned with the user experience. And so they are thinking about, like, how do people use this thing, but the understanding of the user is often very limited. And that results in lots of exclusions because certain types of things are understood to be necessary, good. And any accessibility that is built into them comes later. So for example, a lot of these like social and collaboration tools, they really the especially the ones that are trying to reproduce something that exists outside of the digital space, they often do that through visual means, because the screen is understood as like, the medium of interaction. And it doesn't have to be that way. Like I'm sure that you know about, like, their video games that are sound only, for example, that are designed by blind video game designers, there are all sorts of tools that produce haptic feedback, and like rumbles and things like that. But those are not the the ways that these sorts of collaborative and social tools are imagined. And so in rendering a social space, like a cocktail party as a space that can only be seen on a screen, then that space, like three dimensional and textural and sound and other sensory aspects of that space are flattened, even if they are present. like there might be like, the sound of the clinking of glasses or something like that. The navigation and the wayfinding through that space, is not rendered in equivalent, illustrative quality as the visual. Another example of this that I can think of that comes up in my work is there are a lot of these, like digital whiteboard platforms where if you're teaching, you can send your students the link, and people can put up like, post it notes, and they can write on stuff, but there's no, there's no screen reader accessibility for those. And I've raised this issue many times and when people are kind of like offering up these technologies, and what I feel like often happens, even though it's unstated, is they're like, oh, we'll just use this until someone needs an accommodation.

And then it's like, okay, but then you've built your whole pedagogical strategy, your teaching strategy around a tool that is like inherently exclusionary, when you could have chosen something else that, you know, you could have used like a Google slide. And you could have used some other sort of like collaborative tool or document or you could have assigned someone to do the audio descriptions for this whiteboard, as it's like unfolding. And to me, these are social problems, and they're relational issues. They're, they're about not just what technologies do we use, but how do we want to interact with each other around the use of these technologies, and what are people for some reason unwilling to do because they see it as like more work or whatever, when it's really just like, a question of interaction. And so in a lot of the work that I do, like when I get asked to do workshops on accessible teaching, and stuff like that, a lot of what I'm really emphasizing in those workshops is like, this is really just a question of like learning how to interact in better ways. And being able to hear when someone says to you or understand when someone says to you, like, this is what I need. And like what to do with that, and how to, like engage in an interactive way to make sure that access needs are met, I will say that something that's happening during the pandemic is that there are a lot of new access needs that are emerging for people that may not have been known to, to such an extent earlier.

But there are also just so many, like in the example that you are giving, like screen reader accessibility, like that is sort of like the foundation of web accessibility. And so for a platform not to have that, at this point after like 20 years of people trying to figure that out like, that is pretty not okay, and all the time there are kind of like new versions of that are emerging and that, you know, we just need to be able to, like, collect information about and add to the ways that we think about what it means to build in accessibility.

Qudsiya Naqui

And also what I've noticed, both before and during the pandemic is this reactive approach to design. So I've had so many instances where my, you know, my workplace or another organization I'm interacting with, or what have you will adopt a technology platform, but won't have gone ahead and user tested it or be sure it was accessible. And then you have to do a lot of fixes on the back end that are often more expensive and more time consuming than just having thought about it from the get go. And oftentimes, because I guess, we've had a lot of discussion on this podcast about the ADA, what a powerful tool it's been. But some of the unforeseen consequences of the way the law is structured, which is to say, the conversation about access doesn't start until one individual identifies as having a disability or having particular types of needs. And then you're forced to work backwards from there. And and I find myself and I'm interested to hear your perspective on this as well, I find myself, you know, constantly engaging in this refrain of, let's bake it in, why don't we just have captioning for every event, whether we know someone there needs it or not. So that person doesn't even have to identify the need, it's already there for them. It's built into the design of whatever experience we're curating online.

Aimi Hamraie

Yeah. So I can kind of like zoom out and talk about this historically, a little bit, because this is what my book is about asking this question of like, why is accessibility not built into everything already? And what were the conditions that made that so and what I argue in my book is that accessibility isn't just about putting things into place, or like designing something. It's also about what we know, or what we think we know, or what we claim to know about disability. And at different times, historically, different access needs were understood or not understood or legible or illegible.

So so much of the ADA is focused on physical disability. And that's because the research that was done on physical disability for like 50 years, informed all these accessibility codes, and you know, really like shaped what kind of buildings we could imagine having and like what we could imagine as a baseline, like having a ramp or having a curb cut, but that alone is not enough for meeting the access needs of people who have physical disabilities. And I think the same thing exists for other types of access needs that like, without knowing what they are, and who needs them. Very often, there exists kind of like a norm or a presumption that like, it's not necessary. There are also different norms around built in access in different communities. So in some cases, someone may say there should be ASL interpretation at every event. And also there are norms that sometimes in some spaces say that if there's not a deaf person present, there should not be ASL interpretation. So there is not consensus within disability communities about what a built in accessibility means. And there's the additional issue of like, what people think disability even as So, and like how they understand the needs of disabled people, and who they believe and what kind of information they use.

So for example, like with some of my disabilities, like there are things that are so not understood, or there are things that people's lived experiences reveal that are at odds with what biomedical perspectives might be. And so if someone is trying to think about how to do built in accessibility for someone like me, they may do something that actually ends up hurting me, because if they follow a certain version of our certain narrative about what those access needs are, and so access isn't something in the same way that access can't just be achieved with a checklist it can't actually be built in. It requires relationship and negotiation between people. And that's a really hard thing to achieve on a public scale. Because the public is where we need to be anticipated in order to like, you know, access all sorts of things, and where we also often experience the most barriers. But if we think about like our private lives and how we negotiate access there, it gives us some tools for thinking about this, like, you know, if I like have an access need, but I don't explain it to someone. And then I'm like upset at them for not like meeting my need, not only did they not know, but they may not have known like how to respond to it. And so usually like in my life, I want to be very specific with them about like what I need in this particular circumstance. And I don't want them to assume on my behalf, because sometimes that leads to things that are actually kind of dangerous. But there are like other cases where someone may be like, anytime we talk, I need you to do X. And that can establish kind of like a precedent or culture for how access will happen between those people. And so there's like this relational component, in addition to the part about like, you know, what can we really know about access? And how do we define and understand and study disability? And all of that shapes Whether or not accessibility can be built in?

Qudsiya Naqui

Yes, I think in public spaces, it's hard, because you are not always completely sure who your user is going to be. And it's hard to, and one wonders, is there, is there some kind of baseline that is think that things that can be anticipated or built in like a ramp or something like that, you know, I think it's a tug of war. And I often struggle to with, you know, sometimes even in my relationships with people as a blind person, sometimes I feel that, you know, why should I have to explain XYZ constantly, you know, why can't people educate themselves, but then at the same time, a term that I've sort of abandoned using, but I am visually impaired, so I have some usable vision, and people take the word blind to mean a certain thing and make assumptions based on that. But my experience of vision loss is very different from everyone else, pretty much because I think it's very different. And so it's fair when people say no, you know, what specifically do you need? Because your experience isn't exactly the same as someone in a different kind of condition with respect to their, whatever kind of usable vision they have or don't have. So I think that's a hard balance to strike.

And I'm so glad that you were able to kind of go through the contours of that, as you describe it in your book, I think most people don't think about it. In those terms moving forward from the pandemic, as we were talking about earlier, I don't think these tools and the things that have changed about the way we interact are going to entirely go away. You know, once there's a vaccine, or once things become some semblance of, I guess normal is a is a loaded word to use, what lessons Do you think we've learned from this? And what would you like to see moving forward in terms of access and critical design?

Aimi Hamraie

I would like just a lot more flexibility and willingness to adapt on the part of people who, how the resources are institutions that have the decision making capabilities of shaping, especially like how large groups of people are doing stuff, but even also an interpersonal interactions, because that sort of quick transition to remote participation that happened like seven or eight months ago, that was in large part like, because of a willingness of people to be flexible and adaptive. And it occurred under exceedingly ablest conditions. And so I, I hope that what does not happen is that the pandemic ends and then people are like, Oh, well, we're never doing online teaching anymore. We don't need that anymore, or we don't need online conferences, etc. I don't think that that will actually happen, because we've observed what is possible now. And people have come up with all sorts of creative strategies or doing things remotely, but I do sometimes get a sense and conversations I have around policy kinds of things that there's this idea that there will be an after and we'll just like revert back to the world as it was. And I just really hope that that doesn't happen.

I hope that we maintain this kind of sensibility around like, okay, like how do we figure out what works best for all of us on an ongoing basis and negotiate access and and, you know, compensate people fairly for the work that accessibility requires and be open toward understanding conflicting access needs or new access needs that are missing. With like skillfulness, and grace and all of that stuff, so that would be my ideal. And I don't know the extent to which it'll happen. But I hope that we'll at least be able to like remind folks that they were just doing that like a year and a half ago or whatever, and that it's not like a huge burden, to engage in this, that we've all been training to do it. And that if that does not happen, I hope that and I do think that this will be the case that disabled people will continue kind of like hacking and tinkering with technology in the ways that we do to create the kinds of access that we need.

Qudsiya Naqui

You know, the the real hope is that we as disabled people are not alone in that anymore, that there are other other people in the world who are have seen the value of flexibility and have seen the value of reimagining the way we do things and participate with us. So it's not just kind of a siloed effort.

Aimi Hamraie

Yeah, I sure hope so. I think that it because, you know, like, we don't know, there'll be another pandemic, or some other circumstance that requires us to continue living the way that we are now. And so it will take everyone's participation and ally ship and things like that, to get us through all of that.

Qudsiya Naqui

Absolutely. Well, this has been an absolutely fantastic and fascinating conversation. Amy, I really appreciate your time. And I'm so excited to share this with our listeners.

Aimi Hamraie

Thank you so much. And thanks for doing this great podcast. I've really been enjoying listening to it.

Qudsiya Naqui

Thank you so much. And I've been enjoying listening to yours, so the feeling is very much mutual.

Thanks for listening to this week's episode of down to the struts. This podcast would not be possible without the energy and creativity of Anna Wu. Adrienne Kong, Ilana Nevins and Avery Anapol. Please remember to subscribe rate and review the podcast on Apple podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify or wherever you love to listen. And you can also find more information about our project at our website, www.downtothestruts.com thanks and stay tuned for the next episode of season two so we can get back down to it.