

KU LEUVEN

FACULTEIT SOCIALE WETENSCHAPPEN
MASTER OF SCIENCE IN DE SOCIALE EN CULTURELE
ANTROPOLOGIE

A FITTING ROOM OF ONE'S OWN

On the (In)Accessibility of Fitting Rooms in
Flemish Shopping Servicescapes

Promotor : Prof. Dr. P. DEVLIEGER
Co-promotor: Prof. Dr. M. DUJARDIN
Verslaggever: Prof. Dr. N. SALAZAR

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Julie IVENS

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To those who will benefit,
To those who do not know it yet,
And to those with the power to change it.

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Foreword

The problem of the inaccessibility of fitting rooms was brought to my attention by a caretaker at a home for mentally disabled adults, where I conducted fieldwork for another research project. Being an able-bodied person myself, I admit this insight struck me. I had never imagined this aspect of the shopping space to be such a problematic area for so many people. As I investigated these difficulties it was like a new world opened up to me, with endless possibilities and an endless need for change. I felt very motivated to study this subject and I am grateful that I was able to do so.

1 Introduction

*“UNIVERSAL DESIGN is a simple concept,
but one that requires a fundamental shift in thinking.*

Traditionally, design has catered to averages

– creating a world that few people can actually thrive in.

*Universal design strives to encompass the widest possible ranges
of size, strength and capability, without the need for adaptation or
specialized design. The intent of Universal Design is to simplify life for
everyone by making products, communications and the built environment
usable by as many people as possible.*

(The Center for Universal Design

– NC State University, Raleigh, USA; from Dujardin, 2002:7)

Shopping is an unproblematic activity for most of us. We can get up in the morning and decide to go somewhere, no matter far or close-by. We can go with a friend or we can decide to do it alone. All varieties of shops and brands are to our disposal. All items in the shops are within our reach. We browse freely, choose something of our liking, try it on, cash out, and leave the shop satisfied, all on our own. It is likely that through these recognisable routines, most of us have never imagined the shopping space or the fitting rooms of that space to be anything but ordinary and granted, perhaps even creatively designed and visually attractive. For many people, however, the shopping environment consists of an accumulation of thresholds, both physical and mental, material and immaterial, architectural and attitudinal, tangible and intangible.

The need for an in-depth anthropological investigation into the issues of accessibility of the shopping environment is overdue. For all its interest in social spaces, relations and materiality anthropological research has not focused its attention on these items as they relate to the shopping environment. The little research that has been done on the subject is mostly limited to studies within consumer research or marketing. But these fields have also only

recently begun to show real interest in the disabled consumer. Consumer research did not always regard the disabled consumer as a valuable consumer or research subject (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). Less than two decades ago, John J. Burnett spoke of a “neglect of the disabled as a viable consumer segment” (1996:3) and he noted, at that time, that attempts “to understand better the disabled citizen is a recent phenomenon” (ibid.:5). Presently, consumer research and marketing studies more often highlight the issue of the inaccessibility of public spaces and retail environments to consumers with a physically disabling condition. Such studies emphasise that enhancing the consumer experience of disabled shoppers requires considering issues of both architectural design and the interpersonal sphere (publications Kaufman-Scarborough; Baker, et al., 2007). The totality of the shopping environment, both physical and social, eventually determines the shopping experience.

1.1. Research focus

The present research discusses both the physical and mental thresholds related to accessibility of clothing shops. Material aspects entail the physical and architectural characteristics of the shopping environment. Immaterial aspects include symbolic and psychological thresholds, behaviours, and experiences. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight the multitude of problems that are caused by the inaccessibility of shopping spaces and fitting rooms specifically, and how this presents us with a mirror into the limitations and demands of our own society and culture. In today’s shopping environments, disabled shoppers are confronted with normative spaces designed for the average, normal consumer. Deviating from this norm, disabled consumers are confronted with physical and mental thresholds of the shopping environment, which keep them from participating in the act and experience of shopping.

This research is concerned with the inaccessibility of fitting rooms in particular because it proves to be a topic craving for more thorough investigation. Even where consumer research discusses shopping environments, the problem of inaccessible fitting rooms is only mentioned in passing (see, for example, MacDonald, et al., 1994, Kaufman, 1995; Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998, 1999). The fitting room, though, is a crucial part of a shopping experience. As all architectural features of a built environment, it may either help or hinder consumers' shopping experience. The design of fitting rooms decides whether a wheelchair user or blind person, for example, can try on clothes independently or whether they rely on a friend, family member, or paid assistant for help. The present research pioneers because it focuses on the physical aspects of shops' fitting spaces in relation to the disabled shopper's experiences on a socio-cultural level. The consequences of fitting room inaccessibility venture far beyond the shopping experience itself as it impacts different levels of the disabled consumer's life. A well-designed fitting room can hugely contribute to a disabled consumer's self-perception as an independent and self-reliant customer.

A fitting room should be accessible and useable by virtually all consumers in a comfortable and autonomous manner. Fitting rooms should thus be universally designed, in contrast to today's standard design for the average consumer.¹ Since the separation between designer, producer and user, there exists a discrepancy between architectural design and the end users' experiences of that design (Heylighen & Strickfaden, 2012). Awareness about this discrepancy and a shift from a medical to a social model of disability has given rise to the relatively recent introduction of Universal Design (UD)² theories in architectural fields. Coined by Ronald L. Mace in 1988 (Dujardin, 2002), UD is a conceptual architectural framework that pillars on seven key principles³ guiding the designing process toward "products and environments [...] usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Center for Universal Design

website). As “a contextually integrated universal matter” (Dujardin, 2010:1), UD is as contextual as it is universal. It is contextual in the sense that “dealing with the concept requires a full understanding of the spatial and cultural context of the place where it is being introduced and adopted” (ibid.). It is universal because it “is truly a human-centred concept and applicable to each one of us, both the disabled and non-disabled” (ibid.). In the context of this thesis, which seeks to highlight the problems with today’s fitting rooms and the possibilities for a new design, I refer to UD as Design for Diversity (DfD). A humanisation of the shopping space according to a DfD entails humanisation of both the material and the immaterial aspects of accessibility, the latter “often neglected by designers” (ibid.:2).

Moreover, a key concept when designing for diversity is “the chain of accessibility,” which refers to four distinct “levels of accessibility” that characterise an area, a site, or a building (ibid.:6). These four levels are: to reach, to enter, to use, and to understand (pertaining to the avoidance of stigmatisation and mental thresholds). Accessibility is more than manoeuvring through a built environment: it is reaching, entering, using and understanding that environment in more than its material sense. Although this thesis mainly focuses on *using* and *understanding* clothing shops and its fitting rooms, aspects of *reaching* and *entering* the shopping environment are taken into account.

This thesis research thus combines anthropological theory with issues related to architectural design and consumer research. The main research questions of this thesis testify to its interdisciplinary character. Set out to determine the material and immaterial thresholds of the shopping environment, this thesis investigates to what extent the fitting rooms in Flemish clothing shops are accessible in a physical and symbolic sense and how this (in)accessibility reflects the disabled person’s position in society. How does the layout of the shopping environment and the interpersonal service express the disabled person’s consumer value?

How do the different aspects of the shopping environment disable or enable consumers and how do shop attendants tend to these consumers' needs? How does this in turn influence the consumer's shopping behaviour and their sense of feeling accepted? Finally, how can the disabled consumer's shopping experience be enhanced by a humanisation of the shopping space through redesigning the fitting rooms and its surroundings for diversity?

1.2. Methodology and research materials

My research started in the spring semester of 2013 when I chose to investigate this topic for a master course paper. After a limited but successful research period I decided to expand the topic to a master thesis. Whereas the research for the paper was limited to wheelchair users, I broadened the pool of participants to include persons with other impairments, such as visual impairments (blind and partially sighted persons) and hearing impairments (deaf and hard of hearing persons). Moreover, I included consumers who are not impaired but who may be equally hindered in their participation with the shopping environment because of its physical thresholds⁴: these participants included the elderly, and parents with little children and pushchairs. The participants were adult men and women, one of them being a mother of a physically impaired child. To ensure their anonymity, these participants have been given pseudonyms.

Using my previously gained insights on the topic, the master thesis research started in June 2013 and continued until February 2014. As with the master course paper, I employed different research methods during my ethnographic fieldwork in shopping centres and on shopping streets across Flanders. During the first, observational phase of the research, which occurred in the spring semester of 2013, I observed the behaviour of consumers of the participant group in the shopping environment and the shop personnel's different reactions to this. Specifically, this concerned behaviours upon entering the shop, manoeuvring through the shop, and reactions to the shopping

environment. During this observational phase, I had several casual conversations with shoppers whom I met during their shopping trips, querying about their personal experiences with shopping, fitting rooms, and shop personnel.

At the same time, I spoke with shop personnel and managers about their approach towards the participant group. I visited multiple clothing shops (selling men's, women's, and/or children's wear) to ask whether there was an adapted fitting room available for wheelchair users, for example, how frequently they encountered wheelchair-using shoppers, how these shoppers interacted with the shopping environment, and whether/how shop personnel generally see to these customers' needs. During this time I added an experimental aspect to the research. It involved experiencing a shopping trip in a wheelchair myself and a second trip during which I accompanied my mother who acted as a wheelchair user. These two trips were planned mainly to test the shop personnel's claims that the fitting rooms and service were well-adapted to wheelchair-using shoppers.

During the months of June, July, and August 2013, I started to raise awareness about my thesis research in order to broaden my pool of participants. I contacted organisations for the blind and deaf as well as a rehabilitation centre for physically challenged persons. I posted a call for participants on the social network site, Facebook, on my own page as well as on several community pages that target people familiar with (a specific) disability. I conducted 14 semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded, totalling in nearly 500 mins of audio-recorded conversation. An important part of the participant observation entailed going on shopping trips with several participants who served as user experts in guiding me through what they experience as a regular day of shopping. I organised such shopping trips with five participants (one wheelchair user and four visually impaired persons). These shopping trips were often combined with an in-depth interview. These trips were very valuable to me. I was able to experience first-hand a

regular day of shopping for an impaired person and these trips proved to be a fruitful source of information. During the fall semester of 2013 I was abroad on an Erasmus exchange project. I continued to search for new participants via e-mail and Facebook. During this time, I interviewed two hearing impaired participants online. The practical part of the research ended in February 2014 with a final interview back in Belgium.

To concretise my findings, I have added additional research material. A schematic overview (Appendix A) shows a list of different fitting room accessories that are generally associated with an adapted fitting room. The overview shows to what extent the fitting rooms of the visited shops are equipped with these accessories. During fieldwork, I took several photographs of fitting rooms (Appendix B), for which I had the permission of the shop personnel or manager working that day. The photos are taken in such a way that the shop itself is unrecognisable. A final attachment (Appendix C) includes computer renders of a new fitting room design according to architect Robin Julien's creative interpretation of the research findings. This visual representation serves as a concretisation of the theoretical results and shows one possibility for a fitting room design for diversity.

2 The Material: Physicalities of the Fitting Room

This first chapter explores the material aspects of the shopping servicescape and its fitting rooms with regard to their architectural design. Designed for the norm, fitting rooms are normative spaces which confront disabled consumers with a degree of physical inaccessibility. I argue that, following Ingold, the taskscape of dressing oneself is culturally and normatively inscribed, because of which other ways of dressing are not supported by present fitting spaces. In order to accommodate disabled consumers and those otherwise hindered by the physical environment, more attention should be paid to features and tools in the fitting room design. By introducing tools and transforming features into tools the fitting space will become an adaptive space which affords individual consumers the opportunity to manipulate to an extent the fitting space according to their personal needs. Besides these purely material considerations, this chapter looks into the ways in which the material aspects and layout of the shopping servicescape and its fitting rooms reflect the societal position of disabled persons, which provides a bridge to the second chapter on the immaterial aspects of the shopping servicescape.

Now it doesn't occur to me because I push the wheelchair myself
and because I pull him inside, but I think, if he'll have to do that himself,
then you can scratch a lot of shops.

Tina about her son Brent, a boy who uses a wheelchair

If I would own a shop, no matter what kind, I would see to it that it is
accessible for all wheelchair users – well, for all disabled people.
Wheelchair users as well because those people also have the right to go
shopping. I mean, an electric wheelchair, for example, cannot enter the lifts
of [that shopping centre]. They are too narrow.

Robert, blind

2.1. *The shopping servicescape*

The shopping space is a designed space, built to accommodate the average consumer. Where consumer and service meet is what Mary Jo Bitner (1992) has called the “servicescape.” She defines it broadly as “the built environment (i.e., the manmade, physical surroundings as opposed to the natural or social environment),” which “affects *both* consumers and employees in service organizations” (ibid.:58; original emphasis). A servicescape is made up of “atmospherics, or physical design and decor elements” (ibid.:57), which may affect the customers and employees on different levels and in positive or negative ways. For Bitner, servicescapes range from self-service machines, such as ATMs and kiosks, to hotels and restaurants which are characterised by interpersonal services, and remote services, such as telephone or insurance companies. A retail service such as a shop fits into the middle category because it entails interpersonal services between customers and employees within a specific physical setting.

Moreover, a shopping space is an elaborate environment (opposed to “lean environments” such as kiosks (ibid.:58-59)) because it may have “many floors, rooms, sophisticated equipment, and complex variability in functions performed within the physical facility” (ibid.:59). Because a shopping space is an interpersonal and elaborate environment, close attention should be paid to the multitude of atmospheric elements that make up the servicescape. Research shows that persons perceive and respond to the environment as a holistic entity consisting of separate dimensions (Bitner, 1992). For servicescapes, three dimensions apply: ambient conditions (affecting the five senses), design and function of the space (machinery, equipment and furnishings), and signs, symbols and artefacts (communicating information, directions, rules of behaviour, and image) (ibid.). Both customers and employees react to aspects of these dimensions on a cognitive, emotional, and physiological level (ibid.). To ensure customers’ and employees’ wellbeing and productiveness in their tasks of consuming and

providing appropriate service, respectively, Bitner stresses the importance of evaluating the servicescape elements in its variety and complexity. In developing a DfD, then, these dimensions are to be taken into account.

As Bitner acknowledges, “[o]ne of the challenges in designing environments to enhance individual approach behaviors and encourage the appropriate social interactions is that optimal design for one person or group may not be the optimal design for others” (ibid.:61). However, she speaks of the discrepancy between customers’ wants and employees’ wants rather than of the different expectations of specific consumer profiles. An in-depth venture into specific consumer profiles, such as impaired consumers, is largely lacking. Impaired consumers are left out as if they do not belong to any group of consumers or as if they are not part of the public space. As a minority, disabled consumers are expected only in exceptional cases (Kaufman-Scarborough, 2001). Consequently, little attention has been given to the disabled consumer.

Bitner made a crucial point by showing how elements in the shopping servicescape have very specific consequences for consumer behaviour. The designed environment impacts the social interactions that takes place within that environment and thus also the experience of the consumer, both the disabled or able-bodied. More importantly, the choice for particular environmental or architectural features in the servicescape says a lot about the target group of customers that the shop or brand has in mind and, consequently, the kind of customer they expect, accept, and want to attract (Baker, et al., 2007). As became clear during my investigation and as I will argue here, the shopping servicescape and its environmental features are still not built for the exception as much as they are built for the norm.

2.2. *Design for the norm*

In *Being Alive*, anthropologist and philosopher Tim Ingold (2011) elaborates on the historical development of man's bipedal body posture. Together with the enlargement of the brain and the remodelling of the hand, he notes, it has become one of the characteristics thought to set man apart from animals, and specifically our closest relatives, the apes. But this consideration was not only a comment on our evolutionary history. "[T]he rise of head over heels," as Ingold puts it (ibid.:33), signalled the rise of man from the animal realm of nature. Man's "upright posture laid the foundations for his pre-eminence in the animal kingdom, and for the growth of culture and civilisation" (ibid.:33). Whereas our human hands began to develop to accommodate specific tasks and labour practices, our feet, having lost much of their flexibility and dexterity through evolution, were demoted to merely support and mobilise our bodies. Whereas the hands became the tools of intellect with which we manipulate the world and "deliver the intelligent designs or conceptions of the mind *upon* it," the feet, "impelled by biomechanical necessity, undergird and propel the body *within* the natural world" (ibid.:35; original emphasis). Through bipedal posture, the mind could rise from the body as intelligence took control over the animal instinct: "the achievement of bipedalism was critical to raising human beings above the threshold of nature and to establishing the superiority of the human condition over that of the animals. The quadruped [...] was necessarily a being inferior to man" (ibid.:41). Walking upright consequently became the civilised way of moving about and Ingold emphasises that particularly in western societies great significance is put on the achievement of being able to walk from as early an age as possible (ibid.:40-41).

Walking upright on two legs is part of the normative realm of human capability. The focus on the normative is reflected in the architecture of the servicescape. As a servicescape, the shopping space is a normative space, designed for and according to the norm. The wheelchair user, to bring forth one obvious case of disability,

does not belong to the normative realm of bipedal humans. The wheelchair user is a deviation from the norm. They do not perceive the world through the feet, as Ingold describes it, but rather through the wheels of their wheelchair, to make a fitting analogy. When a wheelchair user enters a public space designed for the norm, they experience inconveniences because of their alternative way of moving about. Such alternative ways are not sufficiently taken into account during the designing process. When fitting rooms are designed for the average, upright consumer, problems occur when the space is confronted with a seated person. The wheelchair-using shopper is burdened by small and dark fitting rooms, coat hooks that hang overhead, doors turning inwards and in inconvenient angles, and mirrors placed outside of the fitting rooms or that are too narrow and high to see clearly one's own body from a seated position. For a wheelchair-using shopper, an accessible fitting space means the difference between needing assistance or being able to do the task of dressing autonomously and independently. In other words, today's ill-designed spaces feed the idea that disabled persons need quasi-continuous assistance to be and move in the world, even during quotidian activities.

Deviating from the norm, disabled persons do not belong completely within the "structure of positions" that is the "basic model of society" (Turner, 2009:147). Falling between the different possible structures and identities, a disabled person may thus be regarded as a "liminal *persona*" characterised by "invisibility" (ibid.:149; original emphasis). This invisibility is the result of the fact that disabled people as liminal personae in their in-between position, "are neither one thing nor another; or may be both; or neither here nor there; or may even be nowhere (in terms of any recognized cultural topography), and are at the very least 'betwixt and between' all the recognized fixed points in space-time of structural classification" (ibid.:151). Because of this 'between-ness,' disabled persons are "the marginal figures of everyday life, academic research, and bodily experience, [and] are positioned betwixt and

between contrasting values, conflicting assumptions, painful conceptions, and infuriating and ordinary expectations” (Titchkosky, 2009: 261). According to Titchkosky, however, disabled persons are not “‘fully outside’ of mainstream life. Instead, we are marginal” (ibid.). As Ravaud and Stiker (2001) point out, the disabled person in modern societies is not excluded *from* society but excluded *within* society. As marginal consumers, then, the disabled hold a liminal position between valued and devalued customer.

Designed for the norm, the physical aspects of fitting rooms can create material thresholds that communicate immaterial messages the disabled customer’s inclusion or exclusion. Physical thresholds may thus create mental thresholds. This also counts for the placement of the fitting rooms within the larger shopping environment. In general, fitting rooms are placed somewhere in the back of shops in order to force shoppers to navigate through most of the shop to reach them. This is in itself problematic for disabled shoppers, the elderly, parents with pushchairs and others inhibited in their participation with the environment. On top of this, adapted fitting rooms are usually placed in the very back of the fitting room area or at the end of a line of fitting rooms. This is illogical because at least the adapted fitting rooms should be easily reachable. The purpose of adapted fitting rooms is defeated if they are not reachable or accessible. If there are no adapted fitting rooms available, disabled shoppers might still be directed to the last fitting room in line, as the following fieldwork case illustrates. In a women’s shop, a member of shop personnel told me that they have a returning customer who uses a wheelchair. They let this woman use the last fitting room, which is incidentally the farthest removed from the shop entrance, supposedly to give this woman a more privately located space. However, this fitting room was right next to the door leading to the stock area, through which shop personnel need to pass continuously. It seemed more as if shop personnel were taking care of other customers’ wellbeing rather than the woman’s by placing her as farthest removed from other shoppers as possible. Another remarkable case

was a men's shop that was recently renovated. A member of the shop personnel mentioned that they used to have an adapted fitting room but that it was not integrated in the new design of the shop because it did not fit the concept anymore.

Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered many situations with regard to the placement of fitting rooms which seemed highly illogical to me but which nevertheless go by largely unnoticed for the able-bodied population of shoppers. For example, many shops have multiple storeys and departments, such as a men's department, a women's department and a children's department. In one of the more popular shops in Flanders, which is incidentally known for its more than average focus on accessibility, the first floor of the shop is reserved for the maternity clothes and larger sizes. However, whereas the shop has a quite accessible fitting room on the ground floor to try on regular women's wear, no such fitting room was installed on the first floor. As a result, pregnant women, parents with children, and larger women would have to go to the first floor by way of the regular stairs or the escalator to try on clothes in regular, small-sized fitting rooms. Moreover, parents have to leave their pushchairs at the bottom of the escalator to go to the first floor and obese women in wheelchairs would be unable to reach it at all. The same problem occurs when shops may adapted fitting rooms only on the first floor, which people who would use these fitting rooms are unable to reach.

Moreover, often larger shops with multiple departments have only a few adapted fitting rooms available and often these are located in only one area of the shop. Disabled shoppers must therefore often try on clothes in a different area than where they were looking for clothes. For example, men must try on their clothes in the women's area or vice versa. Sometimes, such an illogical organisation between the placement of accessible fitting rooms, on the one hand, and the available collections within a shop, on the other, may reveal important issues concerning the liminal position of disabled shoppers. In a particular shop that I visited during fieldwork, the

fitting rooms of the regular women's and men's collections could be reached only by way of a few steps. Consequently, as the shop personnel told me, wheelchair-using shoppers were redirected to the fitting rooms in the children's area because no steps would burden the wheelchair. Obviously, the shop was designed as such to benefit parents with pushchairs and young children. However, because the adult wheelchair user is forced to use a fitting room in the children's area of the shop, he or she is quite literally placed in a liminal position between adult and child. Moreover, most children's shops that I visited did not have an adapted fitting room. One shop had a fitting room which was slightly larger than the others but did not accommodate wheelchair-using children or pushchairs in any additional way than by way of its size. Shop personnel from other children's shops told me that they usually drape the curtain of the fitting room around the wheelchair in an attempt to artificially 'enlarge' the room, which inhibits the privacy of the shopper, an issue discussed in the next chapter.

2.3. Dressing as taskscape

Today's fitting rooms are likewise designed for the taskscape of dressing oneself as an average, able-bodied consumer. Ingold speaks of the taskscape as a "field of practice" (2011:59) in which certain activities related to a task are performed. As task, he writes elsewhere, is "any practical operation, carried out by a skilled agent in an environment, as part of his or her normal business of life" (1993:158). While performing a task, one is in "a continual engagement" (2011:59) with the taskscape, as "the entire ensemble of tasks, in their mutual interlocking" (1993:158). A "taskscape is to labour what the landscape is to land" (ibid.). A taskscape, then, "embeds humans and landscape" (Michael, 2000:108).

Like walking, the ways in which we dress, what we wear and how we wear it are equally culturally inscribed and subject to socialisation. Although it is not usually regarded as a specific skilful

technique or an issue for further investigation, dressing oneself is by no means uniformly practiced by all people. There are different ways of putting on a sweater, for example. You could say there are two kinds of people when it comes to putting on a sweater: those who first put both arms into the sleeves of the sweater and push them in up to the shoulder before pulling the sweater over their heads, and those who first pull the sweater over their heads after which they push in the arms one before the other. This simplified example illustrates that even the most basic of daily practices requires a set of learned techniques that are distributed unevenly over the human population. Because able-bodied persons belong to the norm of upright people for which the fitting room is ultimately designed, the actual practices of putting on a sweater in different ways lead to the same result, namely of being dressed. But consumers whose ways of dressing diverge from the normative way are burdened by the ill-adaptedness of the fitting room. When people are unable to dress themselves in a standing position, for example because they are in a wheelchair, dressing becomes a problematic and exhausting activity. A multitude of factors influences the wheelchair user's process of dressing, which do not apply to the dressing taskscape of the regular shopper: the type of wheelchair used (manual or electric), fitting room size and door width; the type, location and severity of the impairment; the articles of clothing they wish to put on; their seated position. The poor design of fitting rooms can cause consumers to feel disabled in the particular task of trying on clothes, causing them to avoid the situation altogether (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). Tina, a mother whose son uses a wheelchair, mentioned:

Well, I must say, he actually never goes inside fitting rooms because it is just too narrow to enter with a wheelchair, because there are not a lot of chairs in it – well, not a lot or none. So yeah, I have to place him on something to do [the fitting]. So what I usually do is buy something based on what it looks like [...] And if I really

say like, there's a sweater and I really want to try it, then I just do it in the shop.

Wheelchair-using shoppers are only one example of consumers that are hindered in their participation with the shopping environment. Persons with visual impairments, to give another example, navigate the shopping environment differently from other shoppers. They do not perceive the world through their feet but rather through their hands, feeling the environment with their fingers. When entering a fitting room, blind shoppers map the room by letting the fingers and hands slide across the walls, registering the size and the objects within reach. Because the average consumer is sighted and able to perform the normative way of dressing, many fitting rooms today are not appropriate for blind or partially sighted shoppers. Some aspects of fitting room design are potentially dangerous, as fieldwork also showed. When I was on a shopping trip with one of my blind participants, Lucy, we entered a fitting room in which the mirror was framed with uncovered light bulbs to give it a retro look. As my participant automatically began to scan the room, she came into reach of the mirror. Before I could warn her about the lamps, she had already burnt her fingers. Moreover, the coat hooks in that fitting room were dangerously protruding outwards. Because they were also installed on a particular height above the average range of hand motions, there was the possibility that the coat hooks came in contact with the eyes before being noticed by the hands. Such situations give an idea about the many difficulties and dangers involved when designing a fitting room for the average customer rather than for a diverse range of customers.

Researchers have noted how some of today's leading brands and companies have taken notice of the disabled consumers as "the next consumer niche" (Prager, 1999) and "profitable marketing targets" (Chang, 2014:45). Companies have adapted their services and clothes to better fit the impaired body of the disabled consumer, which suggests a positive turn in the clothing and service industry.

However, what these studies seem to overlook is that the actual purpose of such adaptations is defeated if the disabled consumer has no access to the shopping environment that offers these products. Whether this is the physical environment of the fitting room or the cyberspace of the online shopping application, if the disabled consumer cannot enter and participate in the designed space, the adapted merchandise is out of their reach. Whereas the clothes are being modified to fit a diverse range of bodies, the architectural or online design of the shopping servicescape is lagging behind, leaving out a large pool of potential consumers. Observing the behaviour of wheelchair users in shop settings, I frequently noticed how they were waiting outside of fitting rooms and shop entries, unable to overcome the physical thresholds and consequently excluded from the shopping experience.

2.4. Size is not everything

In this section, I draw attention to today's focus on size as the main measure of so-called adapted fitting rooms. During fieldwork, fitting rooms slightly bigger than the regular ones were already referred to as "adapted" by shop personnel (or also, according to Kaufman-Scarborough (2001), labelled with a 'handicap-accessible' sign). In Flanders, a recent decree on accessibility (2010)⁵ updated the Flemish federal accessibility law of 1975 and applies to newly built, rebuild, renovated or expanded buildings. With regard to shops and fitting rooms, the required measurements regarding doors and entryways mentioned by the decree involve standardised measurements. Except with reference to a wheelchair, nothing concrete is further mentioned about the size of the fitting room besides what is mentioned in a number of recommendatory guidelines, which contractors and architects are advised but not obliged to follow. For fitting rooms, it is strongly advised that at least one adapted fitting room is made available among the regular fitting rooms (obligatory for shops larger than 150m²) and that such a fitting

room is at least 160x180cm large. There should be at least one free turning area available for wheelchair users and the space should be readily accessible. With regard to furnishings, recommendations are made with regard to the size and height of seating furniture such as a chair or bench, coat hooks, and grips.

These additional recommendations are more detailed in comparison to the official regulations and provide some useful adaptations that would accommodate a variety of consumers, as I will also argue in the last chapter. Because these recommendations are not official requirements, however, they are not generally applied in the field. In an attachment to this thesis (Appendix A), I give a schematic overview of the shops I visited and the different fitting room accessories that were present. The overview concerns both older and newer shops, of which many of the fitting rooms were referred to as adapted fitting rooms. Clearly, however, there is a lack of enabling fitting room accessories that disabled people require to bring the task of dressing to a good conclusion. Even size and door width was a regular issue because only a minority of the fitting rooms actually provided sufficient space for the wheelchair user to manoeuvre comfortably. An 'adapted' fitting room in Flanders today should thus be understood as a slightly larger space which does not necessarily provide additional accessories such as a piece of stable seating furniture, a grip, lowered coat hooks, a full-length mirror, etc. Moreover, as to which adaptations are necessary also depends on the type of impairment and on the type of wheelchair used (electric or manual). Today's official regulations do not take those parameters into account. Even these regulations, it seems, target only an average image of the disabled consumer.

With regard to fitting room characteristics, I propose a discrepancy between fitting room features and fitting room accessories. Features are here understood as those parts of the fitting room that do not actively participate in the taskscape and do not assist in the task of dressing. Features are the size of the fitting room, the door, the lighting, the ground and the ceiling, etc. Accessories are

the added parts of the fitting room. Importantly, accessories today mainly consist of fixed objects, represented in a static manner. However, they can be transformed into tools which, in contrast to features, actively contribute to the dressing taskcape. According to Ingold (2011), a tool is not an object that acquires the status of tool merely because of its function. In order to be a tool, the object must be “in *relation* to other things within a field of activity in which it can exert a certain effect” (ibid.:56; original emphasis). An object is thus only a tool if it participates actively in the taskcape of a certain task or activity. Tools differ from accessories by their pliability. In contrast to fixed accessories, tools can be manipulated by the users. In a sense, they are adaptable accessories. For example, a mirror can be statically fixed against the wall or it can become an interactive tool (such as the Responsive Mirror system: Zhang, et al., 2008) or adaptable by the shopper by making it turnable, a simple adaptation with which many of today’s fitting rooms are already equipped. A built-in bench can become a tool if it can turn upward or slide in the wall to create more space.

With features and static accessories alone, then, a fitting room cannot become a well-adapted space that accommodates a wide range of consumers or ways of dressing. However, like accessories, features can become tools if they are put in relation to other objects or persons. Hence, the size of the fitting room can become a tool if it is usable and adaptable to the customer. Size is adaptable in the sense that two smaller fitting rooms can be transformed into one large fitting room. The lighting of the fitting room, normally a feature, can become a tool if the customer can adapt the lighting to their, which may be light-sensitive or light-demanding. By turning features and accessories into tools, consumers can adapt the fitting room to their liking and according to their needs, which is the most adapted a fitting room can become.

Thus, a fitting room that answers to the necessary requirements with regard to features should not necessarily be called an adapted fitting room. Regulations pored into standardised

measurements with regard to features, as is currently the case (and as Kaufman-Scarborough (1999) mentions about regulations concerning the Americans with Disabilities Act), will not make a fitting space accessible. The tools with which the fitting room is equipped make it accessible and instrumental. As “a strategy for superoptimization” of an animal or human’s living environment (Kirsh, 1996:439), “[i]ntroducing a tool is one of the easiest ways to change an agent’s action repertoire, for now it is possible to do things previously unattainable” (ibid.:438). This way, tools give way to affordances of which the person can take advantage to do a particular action or activity. Affordances are technologies with which an animal’s or person’s environment is furnished that make possible certain activities and actions of which that animal or person is capable (Michael, 2000). These actions do not necessarily occur but the environment “merely ‘suggests’ the array of possible doings” (ibid.:111). Moreover, affordances can create more affordances, which Michael calls “*cascades* of affordances” (ibid.:112; original emphasis). Equipping fitting rooms with the necessary tools creates such a cascade of affordances. For example, if adequate size is provided, wheelchair-using consumers can enter and navigate the space, making it possible for them to use the tools in that space. If coat hooks are lowered, the shopper does not have to drape the clothes on the seating furniture. If a grip is integrated in the design, the shopper can use this to transfer from the wheelchair unto the seat. In terms of accessibility, then, features and tools are equally important for the design of fitting rooms because adequate features allow the integration and use of tools. The size of the space, in itself only an affordance, has likewise become a valuable tool that creates additional affordances for the consumer.

So although size is important, size alone is not enough. If an adapted fitting room is evaluated on its size alone, the purpose of that fitting room is defeated. Not only does size itself not determine the accessibility of a space but in many instances large fitting rooms are used as additional storage space (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998,

1999). Something similar happens to public toilets for the disabled, as mentioned by my participants and several researchers (for example, Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999; Gleeson, 1998). During fieldwork, I encountered a number of situations in which an adapted fitting room was being used as storage space. In one particular shop, I asked a shop attendant whether there was an adapted fitting room available. She said very confidently that there was one and showed me quite a large room cluttered with merchandise. She seemingly did not notice the contradictory nature of using this room as additional storage space. During my experimental shopping trip in a wheelchair, I was determined to visit this shop again to see how the shop personnel would react when I wished to try on clothes. Needless to say that they did not offer to clear out the adapted fitting room. In fact, I felt that they hardly looked at me and did not take any measures or offered any help when I was clearly bothered by the small fitting room I was forced to use. At that time, I was accompanied by two people who had to help me with my clothes and with the curtain, which was too small, fell open and left me in plain view for other customers to see. The second time I went on a wheelchair trip, my mother sat in the wheelchair and we visited that same shop again. Again, I asked a young shop attendant if there was an adapted fitting room available. This girl, who was clearly new at the job, said that all the fitting rooms were basically the same but that they were big enough. Of course, at that time I already knew that an adapted fitting room was available, so I pointed to it and said, "Is this not an adapted fitting room and may we use it?" The girl said, "No, it's our storage space," as she pulled open the curtain to show the merchandise piled up in boxes and on clothing racks. At this point, I wanted to push through and responded that it was clearly a fitting room because it had a curtain, a mirror and coat hooks. The girl, unsure of how to react, called the shop manager for help. The manager reacted politely and commanded two shop attendants to clear out the space as much as possible and allowed me and my mother to try on the merchandise. This situation required an instance

of creating embarrassment for myself and others. Moreover, I felt embarrassed at my own behaviour. Using the adapted fitting room required asking for help myself and pushing through with my arguments, thereby displaying some uncomfortable, annoying behaviour, before we were allowed to use the space that was actually designed for this purpose.

Visiting another shop, I noticed how a large fitting room was likewise used as additional storage space. In this case, it struck me how the fitting room was stripped of its fitting room accessories, such as its coat hooks, the seating furniture and the mirror. It was as if by stripping the room of these objects, it was likewise stripped of its functional role as a fitting room. At the same time, the shop personnel's responsibility to let disabled shoppers use this room would be removed as well. Stripping the room of its function as a dressing space would thus take away the opportunity for a dressing taskscape to be performed there. The other fitting rooms of this shop were rather small and would have been inaccessible to wheelchair users especially.

In this chapter, I have argued that the normative design and placement of the fitting rooms in the physical environment provides a reflection of disabled consumers' societal position. They are less valued than regular shoppers, which shows in the absence of adapted fitting rooms or in the inaccessibility of these fitting rooms. The design of the fitting rooms also testifies to societies expectations of certain types of shoppers, such as the general absence of adapted fitting rooms in children's shops, where consumers are expected to be young, healthy, and able-bodied. Moreover, the manner in which disabled shoppers are approached and treated in shopping environments likewise reflects societal relations, roles and expectations, as further elaborated in the next chapter.

3 The Immaterial: Psychology of the Shopping Space

Next to the material thresholds of the shopping environment, its immaterial aspects entail symbolic or mental thresholds with which disabled persons are confronted. Like the material aspect, the immaterial decides for a significant part the level of accessibility or inaccessibility of the shopping environment. This second chapter first explores some theoretical underpinnings by Brendan Gleeson, Henri Lefebvre and Marc Augé, and then elaborates on specific research findings regarding social relations and interactions in the shopping environment. The chapter concludes that the shopping environment and the individual shops in many ways do not conform to Augé's idea of a nonplace but are rather important arenas for meaning-making and maintaining or transcending stereotypes, stigma and social roles. Consequently, together with the above mentioned material aspects these issue can be addressed in a process of humanisation, a discussion reserved for the last chapter.

“I guess I'm a second-rate citizen.”

Male participant, wheelchair user (informal conversation)

3.1. The Bare Immaterials

Important immaterial aspects of disabled persons' inclusion in society have not gone by unnoticed for researchers. As Brendan Gleeson notes, “the development of ever more sophisticated (and increasingly computerized) adaptive technologies – in the form of aids, appliances, and accessible urban design” are thought to “eventually liberate ever greater numbers of disabled people from the social and economic constraints” that result from their impairments (1998:87). However, Gleeson continues, technology not only gives shape to social relations but in itself “is in turn conditioned by, social relations in a continuous historical-geographical process” (ibid.:88).

Because of this, technology at present, although it has developed significantly, is not helping the disabled to participate fully in society. Therefore, “the discrimination – notably, poverty and social exclusion – endured by disabled people cannot be solved through technological innovation alone but must be addressed through strategies which ensure that all social change is responsive to the variety of human needs” (ibid.:88-89). Tools and technologies are not enough to change the situation for disabled people at its core. These artificial adaptations only accommodate disabled persons in a superficial sense. To overcome “disability discrimination” (ibid.:91), more attention must be paid to the social dimensions of the physical surroundings and to the historical development of the depreciation of the disabled.

Gleeson provides an overview of this historical development, which centres around the question of why industrial and contemporary cities have been designed in ways that discriminate the participation of disabled persons. Whereas other theories hail technological innovations as the primary or only means to counter inaccessibility of urban environments, Gleeson offers a historical-geographical perspective which “sees technology in non-determinate terms, both as a reflection of social relations, and as a powerful influence upon societal arrangements” (ibid.:96). Gleeson points to the dual set of changes with regard to social and spatial dimension of the capitalist city. Historically speaking, “an interplay of social and spatial change [...] has devalued the capacities of physically impaired people” (ibid.). The importance of commodity relations has played and still plays a key role in these changes. In feudal society, the disabled person would contribute to their family’s wealth and labour power by working at the home. In industrial and capitalist societies, the separation of work and home and an increased focus on competition had a detrimental effect on the value of disabled persons’ labour power in the factories. The introduction of markets meant that an average productive standard was expected and a new working standard developed to which the disabled person could not

compare. The normative way of working led to a strong depreciation of the disabled workforce: “Physically impaired workers thus entered the first historical stage of capitalism handicapped by the devaluing logic of the law of value and competitive commodity relations” (ibid.:97).

Gleeson sees “the set of social forces that produces disabling workplaces and exclusionary technology” as “the real source of disablement” (ibid.:99). One of those sources is the commodity labour market with its principle of competition, which favours some workers, namely the able-bodied, and devalues others as socially dependent. Important to understand is that the application of new technologies alone will not alter this situation. Changes in the way of building, enhanced accessibility and mobility, and other physical and technological introductions will not cause a revaluation of the disabled labour force or “solve the dynamic socio-spatial oppression of disablement” (ibid.). Importantly, improvements of the environment will be utterly defeated, Gleeson argues, “in order to facilitate average productivity standards” (ibid.). As my own research also testifies, “[a]lthough most Western countries now have in place some form of building and planning legislation that attempts to counter the problem of inaccessibility, there is accumulating evidence to show that such policies are generally failing to reduce or prevent discriminatory urban design” (ibid.:100). Often, Gleeson says, legislation goes against general urban development interests and legislation points are not enforced strongly enough. By Flemish federal legislation, certain fitting room accessories are recognised as convenient and perhaps even necessary. These are nevertheless only recommended and not enforced. In order to secure a better social position for disabled persons, Gleeson argues that a revaluation of their labour power and changes in the social system are necessary (ibid.:101). Disabled persons cannot obtain their place in society “simply through technological innovations of any sort, but [it] must be won through a lasting transformation of the political-economic, institutional, and cultural forces shaping our cities and societies”

(ibid.:104). Next to technological innovations, a change in mentality and enhanced awareness of the social atmosphere is necessary for technology to be adapted and applied effectively and efficiently.

This devaluation of the disabled workforce is ongoing and the association between disability and poverty seems to have become generalised, although contested (Digh, 1998; Prager, 1999; Cheng, 2002; Vogel, 2006). In a sense, impaired persons are considered financially and economically disabled. It could be argued, moreover, that physical or mental disability creates others levels of disablement, which I call here 'cascades of disablement,' by analogy with Michael (2000). Together with a general view on disabled persons as needy, the above mentioned underlying association between walking upright and high intelligence leaves today's wheelchair users, for example, also physically and intellectually disabled in their lowered position. Also, as today's capitalist society puts the focus on profit, the disabled consumer is not the target consumer of most shops. Since they are considered to have no significant economic power, there is no immediate need to change the shopping environment to accommodate consumers who do not need to enter shops to spend money. Consequently, many shops, brands and styles remain inaccessible to disabled persons. Expensive shops, for example, are often designed for a select group of consumers. Compared to less expensive shops that target a large portion of society's consumers, the expensive shops aim to be exclusive and appear financially as well as physically less accessible. Often, disabled consumers such as wheelchair users have difficulty to overcome sets of stairs or other architectural features that were implemented to give such expensive shops an exclusive and refreshing look. Fitting rooms are often smaller in size, answering to the ideal of an attractive and slim body, and only a limited number of fitting rooms is available. Small and inaccessible fitting rooms function as thresholds that keep the wheelchair-using shopper from trying on clothes of a particular expensive or exclusive brand. The idea seems to prevail that disabled persons, as deviant consumers, would somehow not desire to wear

nice, cool, masculine or feminine clothes of a particular brand, as if their taste of fashion is perhaps disabled as well. This leaves them with limited opportunities to develop their personal appearance and image. It could be argued, thus, that disabled persons are not only regarded as physically or mentally disabled, but also financially, intellectually, personally and socially in the eyes of the able-bodied co-consumer or employee.

The bare material or technological aspect of a place reflects social relations, expectations, and mental thresholds. I have argued that this is true for shopping servicescapes, since the physical placement of fitting rooms in the shopping environment may reflect the expectations and wants of the shop and even society at large. Following Gleeson (1998) and his historical-geographical perspective, we know that industrialisation, capitalism and a strong focus on profit maximisation in combination with a faster city growth has greatly shaped urban design regarding accessibility and mobility. Social relations and politico-economic ties have created a space that benefits a societal focus on profit. Following Henri Lefebvre (1991), then, it can be argued that this process is also active in a reversed sense: relations and social interaction do not only shape a space or the technologies in that space, but the space in itself also shapes the interactions that take place in it. The core of Lefebvre's argument is that whereas earlier "the idea it evoked was simply that of an empty area" (ibid.:1), space is actually not only the arena or container in which social relationships unfold and manifest themselves, but in itself the producer of these relationships (and cascades of disablement). In fact, "[s]ocial relations, which are concrete abstractions, have no real existence save in and through space. *Their underpinning is spatial*" (ibid., 404; original emphasis). Space, then, "is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity [...] Itself the outcome of past actions, social space is what permits fresh actions to occur, while suggesting others and

prohibiting yet others” (ibid.: 73). There is thus an ongoing interaction and exchange between the material and the immaterial, which are inseparable aspects and merely different sides of the same coin. The material is reflected in the social relations and interactions it produces, played out against its backdrop.

With this remark, I would like to challenge the idea that shopping malls and shops are nonplaces. Marc Augé’s nonplaces are “places that are devoid of relational aspects, historical detail, and have no concern with the identities of individuals” (Devlieger and Strickfaden, 2012:228). Nonplaces are further “characterized by a lack of meaning, an overarching experience of anticipation rather than living-in-the-moment, a lack of communication and exchange, and a sense of isolation and alienation” (ibid.). Time spent in a nonplace is characterised by anticipation and waiting, whereas the space is emptied of events (ibid., following B. Bosteels), except from the “social experience of loneliness” (ibid.:225). Arguments in this chapter suggest that fitting room-space and fitting room-time do not comply with how these aspects are defined for a nonplace.

Augé would say that fitting areas are places characterised by the experience of waiting and anticipation, especially for the person who is not trying anything on. No need to mention that especially men and little children are assumed to become bored or agitated by waiting outside fitting rooms. However, for the person performing the task of dressing, there is no action of waiting. The experience of shopping and trying on clothes is not about waiting. Shopping as an activity and the shopping environment are rather important sources of pleasure. Trudy, a female participant in the later stages of the genetic eye disease retinitis pigmentosa, explained how difficult it is for her to keep going out and how the shopping centre in particular is a place to enjoy when doing so:

But you try not to shield yourself, because when I have a difficult time, I hardly go outdoors. If I have a difficult moment, then ... I am telling you, the most – if it is a dark day, then it is difficult. Then I hardly want to go out. It is

really difficult. I know, I should go out. [...] So I say, I would like to go out again. And that works miracles. It is something simple but. It is just the shopping centre. And you return with the bus and it is really enjoyable.

Many people like shopping for the unique experience of it. Indeed, the whole purpose of this thesis is to provide insight into the problems and possibilities of people that are inhibited by inaccessibility to have this experience. The shopping servicescape is not an environment devoid of events or meaningfulness. Many shopping centres occasionally organise cultural and social events, making them places to gather and connect people in their mutual interests. Shopping environments are buzzing with interplays and interactions between customers and shop personnel, between customers themselves, and between the persons and the material setup of the shopping space. As mentioned above, the material placement of the fitting rooms may create friction by way of causing embarrassment for the disabled consumer or the shop personnel, and give rise to issues of liminality, which are not meaningless events. In fact, some of my participants expressed such concern with the relational and social aspect of shops that it resulted in avoidance behaviour (see Bitner, 1992) on their part. Because of their previous problematic encounters with shop personnel and other customers, some impaired persons would rather avoid the experience of shopping altogether. Although often forgotten, psychological aspects of shopping accessibility (Baker, et al., 2007) and the matter of feeling welcome or unwelcome in the shopping servicescape are also part of (the perception of) accessibility (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999, 2001; Baker, et al., 2007).

In the following sections, I will elaborate on the interaction between disabled consumers and shop personnel, on the one hand, and the interaction among disabled and able-bodied customers, on the other. Social actions, reactions and interactions between these groups of actors affect the disabled consumers' shopping experience in profound ways. Moreover, whereas the shopping environment

may in some instances be devoid of *verbal* communication (as a theory of nonplace would have it) there are many other levels of communication and exchange such as staring that send messages of (un)welcome.

3.2. *Shop and Stare*

Unexpected or unusual things catch our eyes and fix our gaze. As “a natural human social response,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, staring is both a natural impulse and a culturally regulated interaction (2009:13). We cannot physically ignore an eye-catching novelty, whether this may be a person, an object or a scene. “To be a staree,” Garland-Thomson says,

is to show a starrer something new, to catch a starrer off-guard with an unfamiliar sight. What counts as a new sight in the shared visual landscape constantly shifts depending on a starrer’s expectations, surroundings, mood, level of engagement, individual history, and acculturation. Once triggered, a stare can yield its bearer myriad responses, from curiosity to confusion, attraction, discomfort, even repulsion. [ibid.:7]

From the viewpoint of the starrer, there is the idea that he or she has dominion over the staring encounter and the staree, as is the case with the so-called clinical gaze (ibid.:28) and colonial gaze (ibid.:42). In the inferior position of being stared at, the staree has no other option than to give in to the penetrating glare of the normal, the able-bodied, the white, the male, the European, etc. However, staring, “[a]s with other bodily impulses such as eating and sex [...] elicits strict social regulation” (ibid.:5). Being stared at generates feelings of embarrassment but as staring is socially and culturally frowned upon, a starrer is equally vulnerable. Being caught in the act of staring puts the starrer to shame. Staring is thus “an inappropriate and mutually embarrassing act” (ibid.:5).

Visible disabilities are obvious instances of ‘stareable’ abnormalities. Physically and visibly disabled persons, whose impairments sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as “abominations of the body” (1963:4), are among those most susceptible to staring and stigmatisation, their “*stigma symbols* [...] drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual” (ibid.:43-44; original emphasis). The disabled bear a stareable stigma, making them not only different but “of a less desirable kind [...] reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (ibid.:3).

Importantly, a stigma as such “is not in the bodies of people considered disreputable but in social relations that deem some superior and others inferior” (Garland-Thomson, 2009:44). The act of staring, then, “assign[s] stigma to certain perceived traits” (ibid.), opening up “a special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” (Goffman, 1963:4). Like public places in general, the shopping environment is a space designed for the norm, as explored in Chapter 1. Architecturally and symbolically, the shopping space is the arena of the normative shopper. As consumers, disabled shoppers may thus be stigmatised because of an attribute which is thought to make them unfit for the shopping environment. Incidentally, the shopping environment is also the ultimate place for the stare. The shopping space is dominated by a modern and capitalist version of the stare, the consumer vision (Garland-Thomson, 2009:29). Shopping spaces are designed to attract our attention and catch our gaze. As consumers, “[w]e are ever on the move, restlessly driven by modernity’s mandate to consume, perpetually distracted by an avalanche of information and stimulation, and shaped into conformity by a network of intricately structured institutions” (ibid.).

As Carol Kaufman-Scarborough writes, “[c]onsistent with the theory of stigmatized groups, consumer culture tends to view disabled persons with disdain and confusion, as somewhat helpless persons who need to have special accommodations, modified

construction, and assistance in many public situations” (2001:439). Recapitulating Lefebvre, these social interactions are spatial, produced by the inaccessibility of the environment which makes the disabled shopper as an end user less present and less expected. They are thus deemed unusual and unfitting. The inaccessibility of the space and its functions keep stigmatisation in place. They may be stigmatised as poor, without a want for luxurious products, with a disabled sense of fashion and no sense of self, without a need for new or nice goods to express their uniqueness and individuality. In a sense, disabled people are both present and absent, visible and invisible, in their liminal and marginal existence (reconsider here Turner, 2009 and Titchkosky, 2009). They are often the victim of staring but are at the same time often forgotten by the majority in their struggles with the material and socio-cultural environment. They are the victim of what anthropologist Robert Murphy has termed “selective blindness,” through which “a disabled person [...] would not register in [someone’s] consciousness” (in Garland-Thomson, 2009:83). Even during my own fieldwork, I was struck by the presence of disabled persons in shopping malls and shops, whereas before it had seemed as if they were only an exceptional part of the shopping scene.

In his analysis of the stigmatised versus the “normals” (1963:5), Goffman argued that there was really “only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual Protestant father of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports” (ibid.:128). It could be argued that there is likewise a ‘normal’, stereotypical consumer, the normative shopper who has all the attributes that are expected and necessary for a capitalist consumer society. The complete consumer could be a young, successful, attractive woman with an average body size and a full set of senses to navigate the shopping environment and to be as susceptible as possible to the environments advertisements, campaigns and shopping windows, maintaining a high-paying job

and stable income with considerable spare money and time to spend on luxury goods, sporting an impeccable sense of fashion, eternally dedicated to a flawless appearance according to the latest standards in fashion, following its every whim. Just as Goffman's 'normal' person is always expected but in actuality never encountered, the complete consumer is never really present but always targeted. Consumers are often parents with young children and pushchairs, elderly persons, youngsters with no stable income, physically challenged men and women of different body types, visually impaired persons or those hard of hearing.

As stigmatised shoppers, many of my participants reiterated about their own experiences concerning interactions with shop personnel and co-consumers, which often pertained to feelings of (un)welcome or unfitting (Baker, et al., 2007). For Baker et al., this is determined by "whether a person feels like he/she 'fits' or belongs in the store, is valued as a customer and is comfortable with the shopping experience" (ibid.:161). Situations of staring and stigmatisation are a returning aspect of such feelings. In Dutch, the colloquial expression "iemand buiten kijken" is often used, which refers to a stare that is so intense that the stared at realise that they are not wanted and are consequently inclined to leave in an attempt to escape the stares. One could use "to stare off" as an adequate English translation, because it combines the act of staring with the standard expression of "to scare off," which is the effect it generally achieves. Miranda, a partially sighted participant, expressed her opinion on staring and the association between disability and poverty in the following way:

Yes, it happens, it happens, that they – that they try to create an atmosphere of *grand chique*. Like, so, they associate very often disability with poverty and that is not the case. Like, I mean. I know for example a few disabled people who [...] are not poor at all, but they, as a shop often associate it with poverty and they first try to stare

you off. Yes, with a visual impairment that doesn't work, but my husband tells me.

Trudy stressed the importance of friendliness and how staring creates an atmosphere of unwantedness:

I like it when they are friendly. If they are unfriendly, I will not go back there. [...] At a bakery shop, they were unfriendly. Yeah, it was – I did not feel good. And I said I would not return there to that person. I have always worked in a shop and you feel looked at, that's how I felt. I had my white cane. My son was with me and I felt looked at. I said, I will not return there. They need to be friendly and it's as simple as that.

Kim, another partially sighted participant, has had similar experiences:

I notice sometimes that other customers are staring at me, like. Like I am not as well dressed as they are. I come to the same shop, don't I? Because they are standing there and looking like, "what is she doing here?" Well, of course to buy something. Otherwise I wouldn't be there.

Tina expressed her concern regarding the many stares her son Brent must deal with on a regular basis:

Yes, sometimes it happens that you are in a shop, that you think like, that people stare at you. But yeah, that is not because of that particular shop. That is just society. Because yesterday I said to [my son] – we were [at a supermarket] and a man was there who walked by and he was really staring. But you have some people that – you can sometimes – I understand that they look. I have also explained to [my children] like, it is normal. But you have staring and you have *staring*. I said [to my son], "doesn't

it drive you mad?” It really bugs me. And he said, “No, I don’t notice it anymore.”

Mark, a male wheelchair user, felt that the extent to which one can be stared at may depend in part on the location and environment of the shop itself:

Usually at, let us say, larger department stores [...] in the city centre, where an enormous, like, large crowd can go shopping. And you see also, the variety of people coming there. And you can nicely distinguish the people who have those kind of looks. But those are looks of ignorance, or looks of – between quotation marks – “stupidity” or something. I don’t know. And of course, from children you always get looks but that’s only logical. And kids are radical in that way. They say it the way they see and think it. But that doesn’t bother me, no.

One particular type of staring could pose an intrusion on the integrity of the individual person’s rights. It is the kind that presents a threat to the privacy of the disabled shopper. Privacy, as I soon found out, is a problematic aspect for many disabled shoppers, not in the least for those who use wheelchairs. As a result of the small size of most fitting rooms, wheelchair-using shoppers are often unable to fit into the fitting room with their wheelchair in such a way that their shopping companion can also enter the fitting room to offer assistance. To solve this or because the back part of the wheelchair sticks out, fitting room curtains are often partly left open. Sophie, a female wheelchair user, explains:

So the two of us always need to go in a fitting room, so me and my mom together and then we need to have room for the wheelchair as well. And that is why usually we have to, like, enlarge our fitting room, as we say. That, for example, if there is a curtain [...] that we let the curtain

swell [around the wheelchair], but euhm, then people can sometimes look inside the fitting room a little.

Sometimes, the tactlessness of the shop personnel is responsible for the intrusion of privacy, as the following situation illustrates:

That the salesperson, just because she, because she thinks that I see nothing of it, gives herself the right to actually, without a word or hesitation, pull open the curtain. Or, perhaps because she unjustly thinks that she needs to help you get dressed and that is not the case at all. I mean, a bit treated like a child and then I have to react a bit unfriendly once in a while. It is not because you are visually impaired that you are an idiot, right. [Miranda]

Another, and even more serious, form of intruding on the individual's privacy occurs in situations in which the disabled shopper is forced to compromise their financial information. This is sometimes necessary if paying with credit card is not possible without the help of a second, able-bodied person. One shop attendant told me that they have a regular customer in an electric wheelchair who is unable to reach the credit card device on the high paying desk and who therefore discloses her credit card pin code. Situations like this make others stick to paying in cash, but this is not always possible, as the following example from Lilianne shows:

I work in cash. I can no longer operate my card alone. I always have to be helped, also in the bank. Everybody at the bank knows my pin code, which I actually don't like, but. You have to trust it, dead simple. At my bank, those are really nice people and usually the same people, but, if those are not available, then it is someone else again. And, like. It's not nice. Then you hear on the radio, television, all the time, "and be careful with your pin code and be this and be that," and I actually have to tell it to just about everyone and their brother.

Having to undress in public and compromise your private financial information are unacceptable cases of boundary crossing that happen quite frequently and that would never be expected from, let alone accepted by, regular shoppers. Disabled shoppers are confronted with unacceptable situations and seem to have come to terms with it. It is not surprising, though, that some participants prefer to try on merchandise in private at home, which brings with it other inconveniences such as return trips (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999).

3.3. Take a look

Because staring is considered impolite and embarrassing, we are taught not to stare (Garland-Thomson, 2009). Yet staring and looking can be productive and even necessary. When disabled persons “no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden,” Garland-Thomson writes, “the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of the bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies” (ibid.:9). Staring can be an exploration into our own persons in the sense that “[w]ho we are can shift into focus by staring at who we think we are not” (ibid.:6). However, disability only offers the illusion of being a misfortune that happens to other people than ourselves. “Like death itself, disabilities come to us unbidden as we move through a world that wears us down even while it sustains us” (ibid.:19). As something tragic and unwanted, disability is both an intriguing sight to stare at and a horror to behold (ibid.:19). It both fascinates and frightens us. Disability causes “a disturbance” with the normative world of established values because it is not ready for this confrontation (Devlieger, et al., 2003; following H. J. Stiker). We have thus hidden it away in specialised institutions (Garland-Thomson, 2009:19). Although it is something almost all of us will be confronted with sooner or later, whether by accident, disease or old age, “[t]his hiding of disability has made it seem unusual and foreign

rather than fundamental to our human embodiedness. Rather than accepting disability and accommodating it as an expected part of every life course, we are stunned and alienated when it appears to us in others or ourselves” (ibid.:20). Besides a literal hiding, disability has also become hidden behind terminologies, making it something different (Devlieger, et al., 2003; following Stiker).

If by staring we learn something about ourselves, it is not only that which we believe we are not. It is also what we know we could be. By knowing and understanding unusual faces and bodies we learn something valuable about human variation and possibility. This is something we would otherwise lack if we keep instances of human variations out of sight and consideration. Moreover, being seen is paramount to social interaction and normal human development: “[t]he visual harassment of being stared at is a perversion of [...] our need to be seen, to be held in the sustaining visual regard of an attentive other, the requirement [...] fundamental to the development of the self” (Garland-Thomson, 2009:59, following D.W. Winnicott). Not just staring but *seeing* the disabled is a ‘regarding’ which opens up understanding and possibilities for both the disabled and the able-bodied. Staring may thus develop “a holding function” (ibid.:194, following D.W. Winnicott):

To be held in the visual regard of another enables humans to flourish and forge a sturdy sense of self. Being seen by another person is key to our psychological wellbeing, then, as well as our civil recognition. Staring’s pattern of interest, attention, and engagement, the mobilization of its essential curiosity, might be understood as a potential act of be-holding, of holding the being of another particular individual in the eye of the beholder. [ibid.:194]

Personally, socially and politically speaking, the disabled staree may benefit from the looks of able-bodied others who take them under consideration. Invisible, ignored and unregistered, disabled persons cannot participate or have access to daily life in a symbolic way,

which may lead to feelings of unwelcome (Baker, et al., 2007). This may cause persons to avoid public spaces and to forfeit their opportunities for social interaction and development.

So, whereas situations of staring are uncomfortable experiences for the disabled shopper, feelings of unwelcome may likewise be triggered by a lack of staring and recognition. Many of my participants reported on being ignored by the shop personnel. As Sophie reported:

What does bother me is that – in shops where they know us by now they don't do this – but if you enter a shop for the first time, it happens occasionally that they speak only to my mother and not to me. And that's not a nice feeling.

Most of the participants with visual impairments have made it their habit to attract attention to themselves upon entering a shop. Because they cannot readily know whether shop attendants are in their close surroundings, these participants say they have learned to make the first move to open up a channel of communication:

It is like this, I often have the feeling when entering a shop – I never, ever let myself be pushed in an lowly position. I never let myself beg for help and I never let people act toward me like, “you poor thing.” Those are terms I personally do not know. [...] I never let myself be pushed in a corner ... I enter and I just do my talk. I just ask, “are you from the shop?” – because usually I haven't seen anyone yet. [Kim]

Another, more extreme method sometimes employed by visually impaired persons to achieve recognition is creating situations of embarrassment, especially when shoppers feel they have become victim of unfair treatment. Miranda gave the following example:

It is not all fair. For example, I once experienced it with shoes that they tried to sell me a pair of which one shoe

had been in the shop window and had had too much sun. And my husband was there and he told me. [...] At that moment – that is my reaction – I make a theatre performance out of it. Then I say very loudly, “Ah, and my husband says that the colours are different.” And really loudly so that all the other customers turn around.

When I asked her if she often felt treated differently from other customers, she said:

Yes, and then I respond to it. Because – my husband would then say for example, “yes, they are acting as if they don’t see us” and then I shout really loudly, like, “assistance please,” like really bossy. And then I let – I always call it my Hyacinth Bucket role – come to the surface. Then I play that role a little, which would otherwise not suite me, but at that moment I carry it.

By creating embarrassment, Miranda does not only attract stares to herself but also to the shop personnel, who are forced to straighten out the situation. This is an example of how staring can be beneficial for the disabled shopper, even though it is to some extent uncomfortable and embarrassing for all parties involved. The benefits of being recognised make some participants, especially visually impaired persons, explicitly display stigma symbols, such as their white cane or their guide dog, to signal their otherwise largely invisible disability. Goffman spoke of this as a “method of disclosure,” by which the individual chooses “voluntarily to wear a stigma symbol, a highly visible sign that advertises his failing wherever he goes” (1963:100). Moreover, the above case adequately illustrates the performative nature of shopping, in which actors play out their roles as customer, shop attendant, etc. In a sense, shoppers sometimes willingly take on the role of disabled shopper if this benefits their experience. For example, Lucy carries her white cane while shopping on busy days. “Not that it always helps,” she says,

“but sometimes it helps a little, that they let you pass more easily.”
Another female participant, Francine, says that

I am used to people seeing that I am visually disabled. Sometimes I put [the cane] away but if you enter a shop, then they see it immediately and then they say spontaneously – even though there is a seeing person with me – “if there is anything, just call” or something.

Presenting themselves as disabled also limits the opportunity for able-bodied persons to see visually impaired persons as other things than visually disabled, for example as mentally disabled or drunk. Vanessa, a partially sighted woman, explains:

It is just more clear. Because in general, not only in shops, people see that “ah, there is something wrong, *we* must pay attention.” [...] Otherwise they might think like, “what is she doing there, has she been drinking or something?” Like, “is there something wrong with her mentally?” That is not always clear.

Clearly, both staring and the absence of staring, in the sense of a lack of recognition, may create feelings of unwelcome for the disabled consumer. A last remark from Jill, a female participant with a physical disability, sums up both aspects together:

People just run into you. They just don’t see you. Even with the wheelchair, they just don’t see you. [...] Or you do see them talking to each other like, “look at her.” [...] It is like that, you can feel it. [...] You really feel their looks. And you almost hear them thinking like, “hey, look at her there.”

Like the issue of being either looked at or not, the question of offering help or not proves to be a difficult one when it comes to

interrelationships between shop attendants and disabled consumers. The next section looks into this issue.

3.4. To help or not to help?

Giving a sufficient amount of help to disabled shoppers seems to be a difficult issue. Research suggests that shop personnel in some instances, offer too little help is offered to disabled customers, while at other times they come across as patronising (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998, 1999). Offering too much help impedes on the disabled customer's sense of independence and self-reliance (Baker, et al., 2007). My own participants spoke about either an adequate amount of help or no help at all. Mark felt that, compared to previous times, shop personnel now treat him more on an equal basis and not differently from other customers:

Now a lot less than before. Before, it came across a bit patronisingly from the people who wanted to help, like, "oh, you poor guy," kind of – or it was like, "yeah but you don't have to come in here because you can't do anything here, because you can't enter." But now, well, that is disappearing, fortunately.

In the Flemish landscape in general, there seems to be a sense of satisfactoriness among managers and shop attendants, who claim that, even though the fitting room is indeed not adapted to an appropriate extent, the disabled consumers do not complain. As Kaufman-Scarborough writes, "[a]n important contrast emerges when both retailer and disabled shopper perceptions are considered. Some retailers," she continues, "viewed 'maneuvering' as normal shopping behavior by the disabled. The retailers in the sample did not mention customer fear or discomfort. The disabled informants, however, reported feeling uneasy and often fearful when they had to maneuver through a store" (1999:494). It seems that the idea that it is

normal for the disabled to struggle with the environment, as a medical model of disability would also suggest, remains a strong one. Moreover, because of their struggle, it is expected that these disabled persons require some form of assistance or help. However, shop personnel are often not the ones offering such help, although during conversation members of the shop personnel claimed that they were always ready to help any customer, whether disabled or not. My own experiences during the experimental shopping trip in a wheelchair, as described above, draw a different picture. Like Miranda who performed her Hyacinth Bouquet role, I was forced to momentarily embarrass the shop personnel as well as myself to finally receive the appropriate assistance. The small fitting rooms they pointed me to were too small for me to undress without being visible to other shoppers and as a “wheelchair user” I felt I had the right to use the adapted fitting space.

Moreover, it seems that the shop personnel is often hesitant to offer help if the disabled person is already accompanied by a friend, partner or assistant. They count on this second person to do most of the helping. However, the shopping companion cannot offer the appropriate help if the fitting space is not large enough for two people and a wheelchair. In fact, a companion is often needed *because* the shopping environment would otherwise not be accessible for the disabled person. Often, they cannot interact independently with the environment. The shopping companion fulfils the role of intermediary between the shopping environment and the disabled person. If the adapted fitting rooms would truly accommodate disabled persons in an appropriate way, there would be less need for shopping companions. Also, many of my participants told me that they bring someone along when they go shopping because they cannot rely on the shop personnel for assistance. As Lilianne points out:

I bring along my own people. You can't count on the shop personnel, never. Mind you, though, it's not like – those

people are already understaffed everywhere these days.
It's not always out of bad intentions.

In this vicious circle, disabled shoppers, on the one hand, bring along assistance because they cannot rely on the shop personnel, and the shop personnel, on the other, do not feel the need to offer help because their role as helper is partly taken over by the shopping companion. When I asked Mark whether he sometimes receives help while trying on clothes, he answered that this only happens “rarely, but that is probably also because I always have someone with me. And if help does come, then it is mostly from the older shop attendants.”

But the shop personnel does not only refrain from offering assistance because they feel it is unnecessary or out of a lack of consideration. From the conversations with shop personnel, it became obvious that often they do not know how to behave toward disabled shoppers (also Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998). Regular shoppers mostly require less help beyond the initial greeting and the standard procedures of taking care of the purchase. In these cases, the shop personnel's role in the performance of shopping and working is not transgressed or put under pressure by any unusual needs of the shoppers. They can remain in their comfortable and trained role of shop personnel. If unusual or exceptional situations present themselves, however, more is required from them, which seems to make them uncomfortable. Disabled shoppers are not unaware of this. Monique, a partially sighted participant, explains:

Sometimes it happens that [the shop personnel] do not know how to behave themselves. But then I say, “just act normal.” [...] It's something unusual [for them].

When I asked Miranda if she receives enough help, she responded:

No. Mostly from the customers rather than from the personnel, but that is also a form of shyness, right, a kind of fear also. Not knowing what they have to do to do right.

My hard of hearing participants emphasised how communication is the most difficult aspect when it comes to interacting with hearing persons who are not used to their impairment. As a hard of hearing person, Steve made the following remark, which shows that trying to do good is often overshadowed by not doing the necessary thing:

Sometimes I am treated differently but that is because they want to do me good. So it's positive, but sometimes they keep saying "I'm sorry?" all the time instead of giving pen and paper.

As far as the reactions from regular customers toward disabled customers are concerned, these seem to be varied. Some participants have had positive experiences, while others retold very negative instances. Sophie was rather positive about other customers offering assistance:

Well, mostly they do not help, actually. What does happen once in a while is that, for example, we ask other customers, if they are using a larger fitting room, if they mind switching and most people are willing to do that. But then that is on our own initiative, because we ask for it. Because yeah, people who are not familiar with that situation, they usually do not notice it.

Mark's examples rather illustrate a variety of reactions from other customers:

Well, it once happened to me that an adapted fitting room was occupied by someone who could have just as well used a regular fitting room. And it lasted and lasted. And she had just entered it before me, but I was just waiting

there. And euh, I said like, sorry but you have all these fitting rooms that are available. And then it was in a typical Ghent accent, “hey man, get your four wheels in another fitting room.” Kind of, rather fringy language. Yeah, and you try to remain polite. And then you also have the other extreme, people who say, “no no, come. I will get out. I will wait and I will take [a regular fitting room].”

Customers might likewise be unsure about how to act or react when they are around a disabled person. Some may have difficulty with moving from the role of co-consumer into the role of helper, assistant, or even defender. On some occasions, as the following example illustrates, co-consumers have less difficulty with doing so. Miranda presented the following situation:

Outside, there was a clothing rack with sales. And I entered and the woman came to me and said, “yes, but the sales are outside.” And there was a customer behind me, whom I did not know, a man, and he said, “this lady is not here to buy sales.” He took it over from me. He was actually offended in my place. And he asked to speak to the owner of the shop and he gave the woman a speech about etiquette. And because I was paying with a card at the time, the man stayed and he said [...] “are you in need of assistance with the paying machine? Because considering” – that’s how he said it – “considering the ethical standard of this business it might be necessary.” I was impressed by that.

In general, it seems that help from shop personnel and other customers, whether it concerns assistance when entering a shop, carrying purchased goods to the car, or fetching other sizes of clothing articles, is greatly appreciated, perhaps because the opposite occurs more often. My participants acknowledged that assistance can compensate for the material inaccessibility of the shopping

environment. It is even regarded as more important by many. If shop personnel and customers take the effort to transgress their regular roles and become a helping hand or even a friend for the disabled consumer, this affects the latter's experience of shopping in a profoundly positive manner. A humanisation of the shopping space thus asks such a transgression of social roles. This and other ways of humanising the shopping space on a material and immaterial level are addressed in the next chapter.

This chapter concludes that shopping environments are not nonplaces devoid of relational activity, meaningful events, and communication. As a devalued stigmatised consumer, the disabled shopper is disabled on several levels in the normative shopping space. Continuous action, reaction, and interaction goes on among the different social actors, and between them and the environment. These are opportunities for meaning making and maintaining or transcending stereotypes, stigma, and social roles.

4 More Human, Less Normal: Humanising the Shopping Servicescape

This third and final chapter is an exploration into the possibility of using a disability perspective to humanise the shopping space. As a producer of creativity, disability offers opportunities to reconsider the material and immaterial aspects of normative spaces. A process of humanisation on both levels of accessibility may make the shopping servicescape more accessible to people otherwise hindered in their participation with the environment. I suggest improvements on the material and immaterial level according to the research findings. This chapter serves to inform and motivate architects, contractors and policy makers to come to a design for diversity with regard to fitting rooms by way of creative thinking and application of the research findings. One example of such a design for diversity, included as an attachment, will be presented here. This visual representation serves to concretise and make architecturally tangible the theoretical findings.

I notice that our friends,
who also own their own business, now say,
“yes, actually we now pay attention to it.”
Yes, thanks to [my son].
Tina about Brent

4.1. Humanisation through disability: Toward a design for diversity

Rosemary Garland-Thomson is one disability scholar who fervently emphasises the need and benefits of keeping disability as a central part of our human society. Like staring, disability can be productive. Unusual bodies and faces, out-of-the-ordinary ways of moving, talking and thinking force us to recognise both our capacities and

capabilities as well as the myriad opportunities and possibilities for change. As a cultural model of disability suggests (Devlieger, et al., 2003; Baumers & Heylighen, 2010), a non-normal perspective on the world exposes dominant paradigms and makes us face our shortcomings and limits, both the innate ones as those we create for ourselves. Transforming “‘deviance’ into ‘difference’” (ibid.:10), disability can thus function as a “transformer” (Devlieger & Strickfaden, 2012:233). By being built only for the norm, the environment becomes static, hardens, narrows. As Garland-Thomson writes, “[r]ationalization does not actually reduce human variation; rather it erases our particularities from the record of who we are and how we live. This pervasive smoothing out of human complexity and variation molds how we understand ourselves and others” (2009:30). By demanding and living by this rationalisation, our understanding of life and the world has become narrower, a shutting down of experience knowledge. By challenging the environment and opening up the landscape of expectations (ibid.:9), this environment becomes alive, as we are. There are thus things to learn from living a life with disability as it generates opportunities for creativity, which Garland-Thomson has called “disability gain” (2014). By introducing existing spaces, such as those generally regarded as nonplaces, to new experiences and perspectives from a disability world, nonnormative features can be implemented, reconfiguring the taskscape (Devlieger & Strickfaden, 2012 concerning the Brussels metro system). In this reconfiguration, it is believed that all consumers will benefit in one way or another.

Following this proposal of “inclusive world building” (Garland-Thomson, 2014), this thesis presents disability as an essential part of a humanisation of the shopping environment. Revealing the physical and social limitations of normative spaces, products, services and applications, disability challenges these limitations, demanding a redesigning of the normative into the human. Humanisation through disability entails a dual humanising process on the levels of the material and the immaterial. Firstly, a

physically disabling space is exposed by disabled actors, highlighting the points at which the design of that space needs to be reconsidered. Socially speaking, disability opens up opportunities for relationships of help and assistance, understanding and awareness. The first section of this chapter will handle the material and physiological aspects of designing fitting spaces for diversity, while the second section addresses the immaterial aspects. A third section will bring forward some key motivations to consider a humanisation of the shopping space.

4.2. Material humanisation: Fitting room features and accessories

I will here review the possible material improvements regarding fitting rooms that came to the surface during fieldwork. These adaptations may benefit other types of consumers than the ones I worked with, whether disabled or able-bodied, such as obese people, claustrophobic people, people with mental disabilities, little people, and many others. Moreover, the following list of improvements is far from complete and more research would be needed to understand the specific needs of those consumers who were not actively included here.

In this section where possible, photographs are presented illustrating either a good live example of the adaptation being discussed or an example of how it should not be done. In Appendix A, the schematic overview of the shops I visited shows the inconsistent use of some necessary fitting room accessories and tools. In addition to the schematic overview of visited shops, I invited architect Robin Julien to come up with his personal creative interpretation of fitting space designed for diversity. His design shows that small changes can be made that result in huge differences for consumer experience. Furthermore, his design is not only useable for those big department stores that have virtually limitless space to

spare. Small shops can also make these adjustments, all without compromising either their space or their budget.

The following overview of fitting room accessories concerns comments regarding the size, curtain or door, mirror, grip, seating furniture, coat hooks, contrast, lighting, acoustics, panic button, and signalisation, to name the most important ones. The main fitting room feature that was repeatedly mentioned in conversation is *size*. This is both unsurprising and surprising, especially considering the emphasis put on size from a regulatory perspective, as was discussed in Chapter 1. Size remains a problem, not in the least for wheelchair users who require help from a second person while dressing. A large fitting room obviously also accommodates other consumers who require additional space. Parents with small children or pushchairs would benefit, as would elderly shoppers or those with mental disabilities who might require help from their shopping companion. Parents, I have been told, are often compelled now to let their small child stay outside of the fitting room because the pushchair or pram does not fit in there. In other words, a fitting room that is too small poses a safety hazard. This is also true for the elderly, as Miranda mentions:

An older person with a walker would have to leave the walker outside of the fitting room. They won't leave it behind unattended, because if they then re-emerge from the fitting room and it is gone, then they really have a problem because they are no longer mobile. Here [in the service centre], there is for example one wheelchair-accessible toilet, but it happened once that people's walkers got stolen. [...] So yeah, in a shop it can be expected for sure.

Size is so important that it can make the difference between returning to a shop or not, as Robert, a blind participant, remarks:

Especially for me, because I am larger, some fitting rooms could be a little bigger in size. Because I think that to try on your clothes comfortably is in itself – to me that would be an asset for the shop, a reason to return there. Because if their fitting rooms are difficult for me to even turn in, then I will already think like, okay, if the fitting rooms are that small, what will the clothes be like?

Ironically, the fitting room space should not be as large as to disorient the visually impaired shopper. A convenient and efficient way to solve this is by installing a moveable wall or curtain to divide two fitting rooms, so that when necessary two fitting rooms can be reorganised into one, or vice versa. Figure 8.2.1 (Appendix B) gives an example of how this is already done in some shops: in this particular shop, the last fitting room in a line of fitting rooms is reserved for customers who require a larger space. When necessary, an extra curtain (red arrow) can be used to close off not only the regular, smaller fitting room but the end of the corridor with it. The mirror that is visible in the picture can now be used in this large fitting room, in addition to the other mirror that is present in the smaller fitting room (not visible in the picture). If no large fitting room is needed, the regular curtain is closed (blue arrow). The mirror against the wall can now be used by all customers. Figure 8.2.2 features a fitting area where such an adaptation has not been made but where it could easily be implemented by placing a bar and curtain across the room (yellow arrow) so that a large fitting space, including a large mirror, could be created if necessary. To return now to visually impaired shoppers, indicative strips or signs in Braille in convenient places could communicate orientation points or information (e.g. on the maximum number of articles you may try on) to the visually impaired shopper.

As participants mentioned, a *curtain* can be draped around a wheelchair in an attempt to enlarge the fitting room. It is therefore preferred over a door, which is also difficult to manipulate from a seated position. Sliding doors are sometimes used for adapted fitting rooms, which for example slide into the mutual wall between two fitting rooms. A sliding door is easily handled from both a seated position and by those with reduced physical strength. Moreover, it closes more tightly than most curtains, which are easily moved by a draught of air of a person passing by. For persons with visual impairments, a curtain is preferably heavy and wide enough so that they do not need to worry about being partially exposed. Moreover, they prefer a curtain over a door because it offers a point of orientation in the fitting room, whereas doors could be mistaken for walls. Whether a curtain, a standard door or a sliding door is used, these should not reach from the ceiling to the ground but should leave considerable space on both ends. This benefits deaf and hard of hearing persons who rely on visual cues such as shadows to determine the presence of a person. Partially sighted persons can also benefit from the additional light that comes into the fitting room, while the confined space of the fitting room becomes more accessible to claustrophobics. To state the obvious, the door opening should be wide enough for pushchairs and wheelchair (manual and electric) to pass through easily.

Many fitting rooms today do not provide an appropriate *mirror* inside the fitting room. To be useful to as many customers as possible, a full-length mirror should be inside of the fitting room, so that wheelchair users can see their whole body from a seated position. The mirror is ideally positioned on one of the narrower walls of the fitting room, so that the full length of the fitting room can be used to take some distance from the mirror. This is especially important for persons with a visual impairment who need to consider their full silhouette in order to decide about a purchase. It is also expected that more distance between the mirror and the person sheds more light on the clothes, which makes them better visible.

Moreover, a turnable mirror is convenient for everyone, especially for wheelchair users who are perhaps unable to turn themselves around in front of the mirror to take a look from different angles. Turnable mirrors are already a common sight in today's fitting rooms. Engineers are also introducing intelligent mirrors, such as the Responsive Mirror system (Zhang, et al., 2008), which interacts directly with the consumer. As such new technologies implicitly target able-bodied persons, they could be modified in ways that accommodate disabled consumers specifically.

Also important but often overlooked is the need for a steady *handle or grip* to provide support for the wheelchair user to transfer from the wheelchair unto the seating furniture or to support the elderly customer. Ideally, such a grip is placed about 90 cm above ground (as the 2010 regulations also prescribe) and at a tilted angle, so that it is appropriate for persons of different height. If more grips are placed within a fitting room, for example on both sides of the mirror, it is useful for both right- and left-handed people.

Fieldwork shows that opinions on the *seating furniture* in fitting rooms vary. Some would prefer no seating furniture because it takes up too much of the available space. If a chair or bench is present, it should therefore be removable. According to others, a seat should definitely be available but it should always be large and stable enough. A bench is sometimes preferred over a chair. A stool is generally considered too wobbly and dangerous. For the blind and visually impaired, a seat is convenient because it offers a place to put their aids. Figure 8.2.3 gives a rather bad yet common example of how fitting rooms today are equipped with seats. This particular seat is too small and too close to the wall. It is also uncertain how much weight it can support. A positive aspect is that it can be flipped upward (inserted picture) to create more space if necessary. Besides this, the grip is in the vicinity of the seat but it is too close to it and not close enough to the mirror.

Next to regular furniture for sitting, it was brought to my attention that some shoppers would require a *table* for lying down.

Paralysed persons such as, for example, quadriplegics, would in this way be enabled to try on clothes at the shop, if they would wish to do so, instead of trying it on at home. A large bench could provide an alternative.

As far as *coat hooks* are concerned, wheelchair-using participants agreed that they are often hung too high for them to reach and visually impaired persons almost unanimously called attention to the insufficient amount of coat hooks available:

A visually impaired person carries a lot: you have your white cane. You usually have one aid attached to it, in the least. Now we are starting to carry GPS. You have a purse with all sorts of things that you need. A handheld aid, specialised glasses, I don't know. So in fact, you need a lot but it's also worth a lot of money. [...] If there are not enough coat hooks, then you need to drape the clothes that fit at that time, or the clothes you're taking off, on the seat. Then it's on top of it, then you can't see it. Well, then it falls to the ground if you pick something up, with all the problems that gives. Often it breaks and then it has cost more than what you were willing to spend. [Lilianne]

Coat hooks are ideally placed on both sides of the fitting room, for example two on either side, so that visually impaired shoppers can distinguish between their own clothes and the shop's clothes, or between what they have already tried on and what not. At least half of the available coat hooks should be lowered. The coat hooks should also not protrude, to avoid injuries. To create more space to put one's valuables, shelves or wide benches may also be alternatives.

Very important for partially sighted persons is *contrast*:

For example, a white wall and a black wall, with nothing attached to it. So that you can turn and twist to see as much as possible. [...] For example, if you are wearing something light-coloured, that you can stand in front of the black wall. [...] If you are wearing something dark, in

front of the white wall. [...] And what is also very important, that the bottom, the floor, is in another colour than the walls. That not everything is white, because then a partially sighted person simply does not see where the wall begins. [...] Or at least a contrastive skirting board around it. Otherwise you have no idea about the proportions and such. [Kim]

All separate fitting room accessories should be easily distinguishable, such as coat hooks, chairs, the curtain, the floor or skirting board, perhaps the frame around the mirror, the lighting switch, etc. Moreover, walls in contrastive colours could be integrated in the larger shopping layout, if this would not be possible inside the fitting rooms. Which colour combinations should be avoided for colour-blind persons could be taken into account, also with regard to website accessibility (see Wong, 2011; AccessAbility website).

Together with contrast, the *lighting* conditions in fitting rooms hugely influence the fitting experience of consumers, especially of the partially sighted. Since some partially sighted persons are light-sensitive while others are light-demanding, fitting rooms should be equipped with a light switch so that shoppers may decide the lighting conditions for themselves. If possible, natural daylight is always preferred. Consider here the two fitting rooms shown in Figure 8.2.4: one is equipped with artificial light, the one next to it has a ceiling window that lets in natural light. The contrast between the two fitting rooms is telling. Besides the type of lighting, the direction of the light is important. Of course, lighting features should never directly shine into the eyes of the customers or into the mirror. Lights should be placed in such a way that the clothes are optimally lit and that hot surfaces cannot come into direct contact with the visually impaired shopper's searching hands. Problems regarding cases of epilepsy have also been reported (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999) and can be taken into account when designing fitting room lighting.

With regard to hearing impaired persons, but also for visually impaired persons and the elderly, the importance of good *acoustics* was regularly mentioned. This relates to the loudness of music or intrusion of outside noises in the shop. Also the height of the ceiling, as in standard buildings versus industrial buildings, plays a part in this. The height of the fitting rooms, for example, could be given a separate ceiling with a standard height if the shop is located in an industrial building with high ceilings. Good acoustics contribute to a comfortable flow of communication between the consumer and their shopping companions or with the shop personnel. With good acoustics, the hearing impairment is less likely to be exposed, which avoids stigmatisation and embarrassment.

Another convenient tool, which is not yet used for fitting rooms but already common in restrooms, is a *panic button*. Sophie mentions this:

What might be useful for when you would really want to try on clothes alone is that you – like in some toilets for persons with impairments – can call in help from the shop personnel. That you have a button so that they can come to you when you're finished fitting or when you need help. Because when it is, for example, crowded in the shop, then it is not always the case that someone is standing near your fitting room.

In case of trouble or need for assistance, the customer can signal to the shop personnel. The requirement is that such a signalisation happens subtly (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998), so that the disabled person does not become more stigmatised by co-consumers' stares. Moreover, the panic button should not be too high for the wheelchair user to reach but should be out of the reach of little children. Apart from wheelchair users, a panic button could be useful for elderly shoppers, pregnant women, etc.

Talking about signalisation, many participants mentioned that signs directing customers to the fitting room should be made

more clearly visible. This is necessary, for example, for persons with mental impairments (also persons with autism, see Baumers & Heylighen, 2010) or those who use wheelchairs. The signs should be easily noticeable from a seated position. Partially sighted persons would likewise benefit, as Francine pointed out:

Well, that [the fitting rooms] are clearly indicated, because that is already a problem with us. Usually it is between the clothes and – well, you sometimes don't see the difference between a curtain and clothes. That is sometimes a psychological threshold, to not dare to do it.

Also, elderly and hard of hearing persons would have to address the personnel for directions less often. This limits the occasions at which they need to expose their impairment by having to ask the personnel the same question several times, for example because they did not understand the answer. Other forms of signalisation or indication concern the clear display of sizes and prices on clothing price tags. Unclear indication, such as small letters, are a continuous burden for visually impaired persons especially. Right now, they require quite a lot of help from shop personnel in reading the price tags. For blind shoppers, sizes and prices in Braille could be added.

A final point was mentioned by Vanessa, who suggested that the interior of the fitting rooms be manufactured with soft *materials*, for example with a fabric padding, so that it is more comfortable and less dangerous to scan the fitting room with the hands.

With his personal interpretation of these material directions and considerations, architect Robin Julien put together a new and inspiring fitting room design, represented in several computer renders (Appendix C). Julien's design is represented in a larger fitting area, with two rows of fitting rooms (figure 8.3.6). Both regular-sized and large fitting rooms are available.

The hub of Julien's fitting room design is an interactive panel consisting of coloured surfaces (figure 8.3.1). Multiple

accessories, such as coat hooks, seating furniture, grips, and even a table, are integrated in these surfaces and can be pulled out of the wall by the user. The yellow surfaces are seats, which have grips on either side. The blue surfaces are equipped with bars that provide sufficient room for hanging clothes. If necessary, the bars next to the seats can be used for this purpose as well. The red surface can be flipped upwards to be used as a table, a convenient adaptation for many shoppers and a necessary one for quadriplegic shoppers, for example. Moreover, the fitting rooms are equipped with two mirrors, which hang across from and next to the door opening, respectively.

What's more, this interactive panel also functions as a moveable wall, consisting of a narrow and wider part. As the panel folds, the wider part covers the mirror of the fitting room next to it, hereby turning the smaller part into a ninety-degree angle. In the render, a wheelchair-using shopper makes use of the large fitting room that has been created by moving the panel (Figure 8.3.2 and 8.3.3). This person prefers to use the mirror next to the curtain, so that more distance is between them. Able-bodied shoppers would occupy the regular-sized fitting rooms (Figure 8.3.4), of which the panel has not been moved. This render also shows that curtains have been used to close off the fitting rooms and that these do not reach to the ground. Figure 8.3.5 shows the dimensions of the fitting rooms, clearly indicating that if these measurements were to be both types of shoppers would have enough space to manoeuvre and use the space. The idea is that shops could integrate such moveable panels into the existing structure of the fitting area, resulting in something similar to figure 8.3.6.

Julien's renders indicate that by creative design fitting rooms can be made accessible by accommodating as many people as possible, through enabling them to manipulate the space and the accessories according to their own needs and wants. Importantly, Julien's design is usable by a wide range of consumers, without screaming "disabled."

4.3. Immaterial humanisation: Stigma avoidance

As discussed in Chapter 2, immaterial aspects such as offering the appropriate amount of help contribute to the shopping experience of disabled persons in profound ways. What those appropriate measures are, however, is very personal and situational. Generally speaking, as Kaufman-Scarborough writes, reasonable access “reflects the perception on the part of the disabled shopper that they can be self-sufficient and accomplish their shopping needs with a minimum amount of stress and embarrassment” (1999:501). Avoiding stigmatisation is a prime goal in humanising the shopping servicescape on an immaterial level. A humanisation on the physical level, by way of the improvements mentioned above, would already partly reduce the chances of stigmatisation by making the environment more accessible. On an immaterial level, additional efforts to reduce stigmatisation would relate to raising understanding and awareness about disability. This involves recognising their consumer values and raising awareness about stereotypical views. Next to reevaluating them as consumers, persons with impairments are also an untapped pool of workforces (Digh, 1998). Reevaluating them as workers is one step towards reevaluating them as consumers, because disabled persons’ spending power will rise as will their visibility in the public landscape.

Good quality service for persons with impairments is said to be a main reason for making a purchase in a shop or business (Baker, et al., 2007; Business Disability Forum, 2014). To ensure good service, many participants selected their shopping moment during weekdays to avoid overcrowded shops, knowing that otherwise shop personnel would not have or take the time to care for their specific needs. Moreover, because disabled shoppers, the elderly and parents with children or pushchairs take longer to complete the fitting process, shop personnel and especially other customers tend to become impatient and annoyed. Especially visually impaired participants reported a lack of consideration for the fact that they take longer to choose, dress and check out. They reported impatient

and rude reactions. To avoid this, going during busy days or periods, like the sales period, is out of the question for many.

From the interviews I understood that if shop personnel are prepared to move beyond their role of mere shop keeper or salesperson, a new type of relationship can emerge. Whereas certain behaviour or a lack of recognition from the shop personnel can make a disabled shopper feel highly unwelcome, up-and-close personal interaction is often greatly appreciated by the disabled shopper. It can compensate in great part for the material inaccessibility. If shop attendants manage to surpass their general job description, they may become a friendly and familiar face for disabled consumers. Therefore, the latter often prefer to return to familiar shops so that shop attendants will eventually know their personal taste and style. This seems to be especially important for shoppers with a visual impairment. Trudy explains:

I ask for help. And I ask to see the dresses that are red because I like red. And they know me. That is the lady who likes red. My wallet is also red, my purse is also red. So they already know that to help. But not in any other shop. No.

Robert speaks of a similar situation:

Where they treat me very well is in my perfume shop [...]. There they know me by now. I also know the girls by their first name. If I enter there, I am addressed by my first name. That is also convenient if you're standing in a shop. [...] If there are people in front of me and [the shop personnel] is busy with other people and it is my turn, than it might be better to say [my name], because "sir" – there could be ten people, you know.

Equally important for visually impaired participants is a sense of trust toward the shop personnel. Often, they need to put a lot of trust

in the choices of the shop personnel regarding the colour and fit of certain items or in their honesty about certain promotions and sales. In many cases, my participants were left disappointed after their purchase, when it turned out that they had been talked into buying something that was different from what they had in mind. Here is an example Trudy:

Recently ago, a bra. I don't see the sizes, but "it's ok," they say. But I say, "it's not fitting right." The feeling, you know. Because it's always about feeling with me. And now recently ago this woman said, "no, that's not good. Let's put you in a good one." And then I am confident it will go right, and then I feel good. But yeah, they think, "she won't see it anyway." And that's how it happens.

A similar story comes from Lucy:

Once it happened to me that I was trying on a bra in a small shop [...] and [the shop attendant] really said like, "yes, the bra is good" and my assistant from family services said that it really wasn't good. That they really misled me into buying something and she was really upset. Then she said to me, "I would not go there again." [...] I think that for a blind person the most important thing is the friendliness of the shop personnel. The friendliness and the honesty.

Kim has had a similar experience:

Once I asked for a black dress and I came home with a dark blue one. [It could happen] if they think like, "she doesn't see it anyway," and as a matter of fact I didn't see it.

Friendliness and trust are key aspects of feeling welcome and respected. Another returning issue concerning immaterial

inaccessibility is the lack of good communication that forms a significant threshold for hard of hearing persons and other shoppers. Especially when they are shopping by themselves, hard of hearing persons report that everything is virtually accessible except for communication. When I asked Steve whether he prefers some shops over others because of good accessibility, he answered: “No, not one of the shops have knowledge of sign language, so they are all the same.”

Yet it is necessary to point out that it is not only up to the environment to avoid stigmatisation by providing a welcoming and accessible space to disabled consumers. Many of my visually impaired participants lamented the fact that some visually impaired persons they know do not take the opportunity to educate themselves according to the guidelines for blind and partially sighted persons. Such guidelines and training programs range from general activities such as walking in public with their white cane to very specific skills such as operating the credit card machine at shops. Managing one’s own payments at shops renders visually impaired persons more autonomous than those who depend on additional assistance. Information about such guidelines and appropriate training sessions should therefore be made available and participation should be encouraged.

The same thing has been suggested, by the way, about guidelines and trainings for shop personnel (Baker, et al., 2007). This could raise their social sensitivity toward disabled consumers because of a greater understanding and awareness of their problems and needs. Vanessa suggested that perhaps candidates applying for a job as a member of the shop personnel should be screened for their behaviour and attitude toward disabled persons. Shop attendants could be made aware of specific handlings that would assist disabled persons in the shopping process, at the same time avoiding situations of embarrassment and stigmatisation. For example, visually impaired persons can be greatly helped by a description of the fitting room interior:

Not only the fitting room should be accessible, but also the shop personnel who for a moment – because you enter a fitting room, but if you have to feel it entirely, that’s not really nice. It would be great if someone would say, “and the bench is to the right, the coat hooks are to the left,” and – It’s the same for a restroom, right. You’re not going to feel it to know where the toilet paper is. [Vanessa]

Likewise, visually impaired persons greatly appreciate it when shop personnel describe the latest fashion trends, as Vanessa adds:

Positive is when people look at who you are, like, what type you are and then you feel – you come into a shop for the second time and they know, “ah, that girl doesn’t see so well.” [...] There once was a woman and she said, “this winter it’s a lot of dark pink, and those colours, and you need to mind that.” That’s really great. Then I think, this is like a talking [fashion magazine]. We don’t see the fashion trends anymore, you know. You’re sense of fashion is shaped by the magazines and what you see on the street but with us that’s not the case. We are led by what people tell us, but that’s a filter, right. [...] Those are people who care about their job, who care about fashion, about colours and who want to talk about it. I think, if you chance upon such people in a shop, that can only be positive. And if they can also relate to people with impairments, a bit socially sensitive, that is the ideal combination.

Also, reading the washing prescriptions for clothes (next to the price tags as noted above) was mentioned by Miranda as an additional help that could be offered by shop personnel. As far as communication methods go, these could likewise be taught in training or information sessions for shop personnel, so that they are better aware of how to

approach persons with disabilities or how to react politely when encountering them unexpectedly.

Taken the chain of accessibility into account, besides immaterial improvements concerning *using* and *understanding* the shopping environment the ability to *reach* and *enter* a shop need to be considered. These latter aspects are likewise influenced by shop personnel and shop policy. Important for visually impaired persons is that their guide dog is allowed in the shopping environment. Robert reported that he always goes shopping with his guide dog because this shifts the burden of navigation and guiding from the shopping companion onto the dog. For him, it is a way to relieve some of the stress of shopping from the shopping companion. However, shopping with his guide dog causes new problems in some cases, for example when the men's collection is located on the first floor or higher and only reachable by escalator. Guide dogs, blind participants informed me, are not allowed to use escalators. So, unless regular stairs or a lift are available, blind shoppers with guide dogs cannot reach the necessary places in the shop. Shop personnel and managers can aid in such struggles by allowing blind persons with guide dogs, together with other physically challenged shoppers, to make use of the lift. Of course, if guide dogs are not allowed to enter the shopping environment to begin with, my participant would not be able to enter, reach or use any part of the shop. Obviously, precautions and restrictions concerning animals and the use of the lifts are always in place, often beyond the control of shop personnel or managers themselves. Policy makers on a higher level should therefore be made more sensitive to the particular struggles of individual shoppers.

With regard to the chain of accessibility, other considerations next to the material and immaterial ones mentioned above should be briefly reviewed. These additional improvements relate to the levels of *reaching* and *entering* the shopping environment and were mentioned during the fieldwork by several participants. A thorough

treatment of these points, however, goes beyond the scope of the present thesis.

When speaking of *reaching* a shop, the availability and accessibility of parking spaces is a recurring issue for my participants. Instances in which the parking spots reserved for disabled shoppers were occupied by regular shoppers were reported by several participants and are a main source of distress. Because they have more difficulty with reaching and entering a shop, available parking space is a main motivation in choosing a favourite shop or shopping centre. With regard to *entering* a shop, attention should be paid to the height and amount of steps in front of the entrance. Although this seems a matter of stating the obvious, participants still struggle considerably with kerbs and thresholds. Although they sometimes rely on other people to enter the shop, participants such as wheelchair users admitted that shops which do not have easy access are scratched off their list of possible shopping destinations. Once inside the shop, some guiding strips for navigation toward the fitting rooms and the paying desk, for example, could be introduced. The height of the paying desk should be taken into consideration because this decides whether a wheelchair-using shopper, for example, can take care of their own transactions. Likewise, the height of clothing shelves and product displays affects the consumer's sense of autonomy and independence (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). The width of corridors and the placement of shop furniture decides whether wheelchair users can navigate the shop and careless placement or hazardous parts of furniture affect visually impaired persons. The latter are also very susceptible to the flooring of a shop, especially if rugs are partially flipped over by years of use, as Lucy pointed out. Visually impaired persons can easily trip and hurt themselves. If possible, fitting areas should be equipped with a sufficient seating opportunity so that children and the elderly can rest if necessary. As also mentioned above, the location of the different collections according to the storeys of a building and the ways in which these storeys can be

reached influences the shopping behaviour of many consumers. The different collections should therefore be arranged in a logical manner according to the available storeys and these storeys should be easily reachable.

4.4. Why Humanisation?

Several key motivations support a process of humanisation of the shopping space. Firstly, shopping is a unique activity. Actual, physical shopping cannot be replaced by similar activities such as online shopping, which is nevertheless used by many disabled people to obtain their goods. With its promise to compensate for an inaccessible physical marketplace (Childers & Kaufman-Scarborough, 2009), the Internet can be a successful alternative. Shopping, however, does not always have the goal of buying. As Garland-Thomson puts it, “[t]he consumer is a contemporary version of the flaneur, roaming the mall as a destination, not so much to actually buy but rather to take in the spectacle and to look for possible action” (2009:29). In contrast to online shopping, “[b]uying and socializing merge at the mall” (ibid.). Many of my participants preferred the experience of actual shopping over online shopping. As Sophie puts it, “I would also want to keep the pleasure of standing in a fitting room once in a while and try things on.” On the other hand, online shopping has additional advantages for wheelchair users because clothes especially adapted for their wheelchairs can be found on the Internet. Sophie, however, has “never made use of it because I think it’s a little – yeah, I would rather buy the clothes other people are buying actually.” In an effort to compensate for the inaccessibility of shops, this woman’s mother sometimes buys clothes for her in advance after which she tries them on at home: “In that sense, the limitation is somewhat lifted. But in fact it remains a limitation because it can also be relaxing and fun to go shopping.” Vanessa commented on women’s need to go shopping:

Not all women but 80% of women sometimes have the irresistible urge to buy something. [...] Why? Well, it cannot be explained. There's been enough research about it and it's just like, "okay, it's new again, it's alright." [...] Sometimes people say in a shop, "what do you need?" And then I always joke, "Need? I don't need anything. My closet, like, I have clothes. I don't need anything." [...] [My husband] says like, "yes, but what it is that you need?" And I say, "but I don't need anything." It's not like I am going to walk around naked if I don't for once [buy something].

Most participants acknowledged that they have to make sacrifices when it comes to shopping. For many, it is largely an uncomfortable activity, involving a considerable amount of "fatigue" (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999). This not only applies to the disabled shopper but likewise to their shopping companion, whose effort they acknowledge is equally tiring. About this aspect, Vanessa says:

You actually have to be well-rested for it, right, to go shopping. [...] For shopping companions, it's also a strenuous activity, right. You do have a lot of friendly people who want to help you buy clothes, but they also have to pay attention, like, steps, dustbins, bicycles on the pavement. So in [that particular shopping centre] everything is level and then we just walk in and out, and that is also for her, I feel, a lot calmer.

A second key motivation is the importance of clothes for one's personal appearance and social position. Regarding visible stigma, one's appearance is crucial in passing as a normal and valued human being. "Physical attractiveness," Garland-Thomson writes, "is a form of social capital. The more attractive one's self-presentation, the more competent and esteemed one is thought to be, which translates into economic and social advantage" (2009:37). Clothes make up a large part of that expected attractiveness. Especially for stigmatised

individuals, then, clothing can make a distinct difference and has been addressed in marketing and textile research (e.g. Lamb, 2001; Chang, 2014). My own participants expressed their personal need to look good. Trudy explains that she “will first go take a look to see if it really suits me, because self-confidence is also important to me. That I look good in it.” She adds:

“For me, it also used to be that, with my ex-husband, that I did not love myself. But now that’s improving. One step at a time only. One step at a time. And then they say, “you look good, really, you look good.” But sometimes you don’t believe that. Then I say, “look at my eyes.” [...] I want to keep feeling good about myself. Also with make-up. I want to keep looking good. And that is the most important thing, because before – that confidence was completely gone. And that is returning.

Vanessa makes a similar comment:

I think it is very important for people with impairments, that you have to – that confidence, if that can come from clothes, then it’s okay that it comes from clothes. Because there will be different reactions. There will really be different reactions. [...] Sometimes it opens the road to a job, or a partner, which is also important.

As Vanessa argues, shopping should be regarded as a basic right for all people, as a means of empowerment through dress and appearance:

And then I think like, a personal shopper, they should socialise that more. It should be a bit cheaper. [...] It doesn’t seem that essential to life, right. It doesn’t seem to be the same as when they pay back something to read or a Braille machine, but still it is also important, because it about being in society. And that is also a piece of your

autonomy [...] Those are all – it all seems a bit like luxury and it is luxury. Clothes are ultimately luxury [...] but it is not for nothing that ‘clothes make the man’ [...] and it is often a tool to a better position and that’s what it’s about.

Dress communicates about one’s identity and social position (Roach-Higgins & Eicher, 1992). It is likewise a main part of attributing identity to others (*ibid.*), which, considered in the light of cascades of disablement, point towards dress as a crucial factor in the devaluation of disabled persons.

A third motivation for a humanisation of the shopping environment is profit. As disabled consumers have untapped spending power (Digh, 1998; Prager, 1999; Cheng, 2002; Vogel, 2006), a humanised space would benefit shop keepers and businesses by enlarging the pool of consumers and creating new opportunities for revenues. The key is to make one’s company, organisation or business “disability-smart” (Business Disability Forum, 2014), also its online and web applications. Important for this aspect of profit is the fact that a humanisation of the shopping servicescape would heighten disabled shopper’s sense of personal control, an essential part of any consumer’s positive behaviour in servicescapes (Bitner, 1992). For disabled persons especially, personal control is part of claiming their autonomy and free will during the shopping process. Importantly, the perception of personal control increases pleasure which in turn stimulates approach behaviours (Bitner, 1992), referring to “all positive behaviors that might be directed at a particular place, such as desire to stay, explore, work, and affiliate” (*ibid.*:60; following Albert Mehrabian and James A. Russell). By humanising the shopping space, then, shoppers will display the approach behaviour desired by the shop. Furthermore, disabled shoppers are known to maintain a standard shopping pattern (Kaufman-Scarborough, 1999) as they visit sets of shops (Kaufman, 1995) which they know are accessible to them. They also tend to organise all their shopping in one day, which my participant Mark called “bundling.” To divert from this pattern is potentially risky and

generally avoided. However, these shoppers also display great loyalty to shops that are more open to their group of consumers and invest in providing the appropriate level of accessibility (Burnett, 1996; Kaufman-Scarborough, 1998). Positive reactions to a new shop could thus include it in their list of favourite shops, adding a loyal customer to the shop's clientele.

Besides the motivations just mentioned, the most important one is perhaps the fact that humanisation would not only benefit a minority of consumers but could directly affect many groups of society. Together with the consumer businesses and even the capitalistic system in general, a humanisation benefits able-bodied consumers who are temporarily hindered in their participation with the shopping environment. Even those who might not generally see themselves as hindered while shopping – let's say, those bordering the 'complete' consumer – would still enjoy a comfortable and spacey fitting room, complete with all the tools at hand, good quality service, and increased personal control. Besides, it should not be forgotten that all persons are hindered in their participation with larger society at one point in their lives, be it by injury, pregnancy, old age, or some other permanent or temporary condition. As Baker, et al. also note, "[a]ll customers feel unwelcome in retail servicescapes and other public places at some point in their lives" (2007:171). It should thus be emphasised that changes made today benefit those who need it tomorrow. Chances are, after all, that this includes many of us.

Confronted with physical and mental thresholds that make the shopping environment inaccessible, many disabled and able-bodied persons are inhibited from enjoying and participating in the activity of shopping. A largely unexplored area, fitting rooms prove to be an interesting topic when discussing this inaccessibility because they provide a mirror into the devaluation and marginalisation of the disabled as persons and consumers. These days, thanks to a growing awareness about disabled persons' struggles and efforts to accommodate these persons on a judicial level, shopping environments are more often than before accessible on a superficial level. What we see, however, is a lack of accessibility from the inside-out: as shops and shopping centres are becoming more accessible with regard to *reaching* and *entering*, the actual *use* and *understanding* of these environments, as is the case with fitting rooms, is much less ensured. Is this superficiality regarding the elimination of outer thresholds in contrast to the inaccessibility of the inner landscape of clothing shops a material metaphor for the superficial acceptance of disabled persons in contrast to lasting inner struggles with the notion of disability? One would believe so. The built environment of the shopping servicescape reveals less about the particular body of the individual than about the relationships between this individual and the rest of society. As a normative space, the shopping space expects the normative consumer. As deviant members of society, disabled persons do not belong to this space. The fact that they cannot enter and use fitting rooms in appropriate ways, attest to their *unfitting* status as consumers and members of society. In their *unfittingness*, disabled consumers are present but excluded, stared at but invisible.

As a devalued labour force and consumer segment, disabled persons are confronted with limited access to shopping environments on a material and immaterial level. In their exclusion from the shopping environment, disabled consumers lack opportunities to

develop their personal style and appearance. Considering the cascades of disablement, the accessibility of fitting rooms is a key factor in the process of mending disabled persons' societal position, how they feel about themselves and how others regard them. Although the act of shopping for clothes may seem trivial, it is not. Dress is a crucial communicator of a person's personal and social identity. Outer appearance, however superficial it may seem, opens doors to important life opportunities such as jobs and relationships. To quote Vanessa, "clothes make the man," and woman.

In an effort to change the situation, this thesis invites architects, contractors and policy makers to creatively engage with the research material in designing for diversity the shopping environments and its fitting rooms. As Elaine Ostroff notes, "[i]n order to have inclusion by design, we need the imaginative gifts of every designer, to celebrate the world as it really is - a variety of cultures with a wide and diverse range of human abilities and needs" (2002:23). Perhaps we should ask ourselves the following: when (rather than if) we become disabled, what do we want the environment of the shopping landscape to look like? Because more likely than not, at some point in our lives we will all be confronted with a disabling situation during what is now, for most, a commonplace and quotidian activity. However, the purpose of the arguments made in this thesis is not to force architects into following mindlessly the points of improvement regarding the physical design of fitting rooms. Rather, it is to bring forth a hope that they will willingly and purposefully engage in creative interpretation and designing. Following Ingold (2011), it concerns an opening up of opportunities rather than a closing down. After all, a true design of diversity is perhaps not any standardised design based on official regulations or structural requirements, but rather one that is, by way of its accessories, as adaptable as possible to the needs and wants of any individual consumer. My choice for the title of this thesis reflects this idea. It is a twist on the title of Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay "A Room of One's Own," in which she lays bare the need for women to

be allowed the freedom and capability to write their own literature and to pursue an education and career. At the time Woolf was writing her provocative piece, slavery was common and women were still very much caught in the entrapments of the lives that were chosen for them by the men in their lives. A room for Woolf meant the freedom for women to own themselves, to be independent and to have enough space, literally and figuratively, to be free to be who they are and to develop into their own personas. Particular doors were and are closed to women as they are now, often more literally, to the disabled. Just as it seems outmoded now for women to be denied proper education and equal chances, the lack of reasonable access to the disabled should belong to a different era.

Important limitations to this research should be recognised. First of all, only specific types of consumers were included and not all of them to the same extent. More focus was put on disabled consumers, especially wheelchair users and the visually impaired. This uneven distribution of research material was not a planned choice, it is rather a natural result of these consumers' representational majority among the participants. Moreover, more aspects of the shopping experience, both with regard to fitting rooms as to other aspects of the shopping environment, could be investigated. Research on the spatial experience of other disabled and able-bodied persons could be considered (such as Van Steenwinkel, et al., 2012 on the spatial experienced of persons with dementia; Baumers & Heylighen, 2010 on autism; Kruse, 2002 on little people). The present research thus provides only limited and fragmented insight in the experiences of disabled persons and others inhibited in their participation with the shopping servicescape. My hope is, however, that as working with my participants has broadened my perspectives on their world and my own, this thesis will do the same for its readers.

¹ In the context of this thesis, I speak of adapted fitting rooms when it concerns those rooms among other fitting rooms that are slightly bigger and are therefore generally referred to as adapted. These are consequently also the rooms most accessible to physically challenged shoppers, such as wheelchair users. It should be noted, however, that such rooms are only more accessible in relation to the regular, small-sized rooms. This does not mean that they are “accessible” in the sense that is used here. As will become clear, true accessibility offers much more than what today’s adapted fitting rooms provide.

² “Universal design” is American terminology. UD is referred to as Design for All in Europe and Inclusive Design in the UK (Dujardin, 2014).

³ Together with additional guidelines on how to achieve them, these seven principles are listed on the website of the Center for Universal Design of the North Carolina State University, USA: <http://www.ncsu.edu/ncsu/design/cud/index.htm>. These seven Principles of Universal Design are: 1) equitable use (The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities), 2) flexibility in use (The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities), 3) simple and intuitive use (Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user’s experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level), 4) perceptible information (The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user’s sensory abilities), 5) tolerance for error (The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions), 6) low physical effort (The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue), and 7) size and space for approach and use (Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user’s body size, posture, or mobility).

⁴ This condition of being hindered by the physical environment without being impaired is sometimes referred to as being situationally handicapped (Dujardin, 2010) in the architectural field, where a ‘handicap’ refers broadly to a variety of physical characteristics which may hinder a person in their actions in the physical environment. In such handicap situations, “the inaccessibility of the built environment is no longer attributed to the

disabled but to the designer,” whose design can thus “‘create’ or ‘eliminate’ handicap situations” (ibid.:2). On the other hand, for Patrick Fougeyrollas (1986), who differentiates between impairment, disability and handicap, the latter is a situation which emerges between an impaired or ‘deficient’ individual and its environment, generating processes of discrimination, marginalisation, or stigmatisation for one while producing power and privilege for another. In this thesis, I follow the first definition of handicap situation but I avoid the term ‘handicap’ because of its outdated connotations. I will rather refer to these situations as instances in which consumers are ‘hindered in their participation.’ It should be noted, however, that, socially speaking, these consumers are equally marginalised in their struggles with the physical or social environment, as design has not taken their participation into account. Moreover, because these consumers are mostly able-bodied persons primarily hindered by material thresholds, the present discussion will not always apply to them. The material improvements discussed in the last chapter, on the other hand, also concern them. The other parts of the thesis will largely address issues related to the disabled participants.

⁵ All information regarding the 2010 legislation and its recommendations was retrieved via the website of ENTER vzw, the Flemish Expertise Centre of Accessibility: <http://www.entervzw.be>. The website offers a link to the handbook for accessibility of public buildings, where the details of the legislation can be found: www.toegankelijkgebouw.be.

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8 Appendices

8.1. Appendix A: Schematic overview of fitting room accessories in the visited shops

	Large space (1), wide door- opening (2)	No threshold	Curtain (1), door (2), sliding door (3)	Loose seat	Grip	Lowered clothes hooks	Full-frontal mirror inside fitting room
Shop 1		X	1				X
Shop 2	1,2	X	1	X			
Shop 3	1,2	X	1	X	X	X	X
Shop 4		X	1	X			
Shop 5	1,2	X	1	X			X
Shop 6		X	1				X
Shop 7		X	1	X			
Shop 8		X	1	X			X

	Large space (1), wide door- opening (2)	No threshold	Curtain (1), door (2), sliding door (3)	Loose seat	Grip	Lowered clothes hooks	Full-frontal mirror inside fitting room
Shop 9		X	1	X			
Shop 10	1,2	X	2	X		X	X
Shop 11		X	1	X			
Shop 12		X	1				
Shop 13		X	1	X			X
Shop 14		X	1	X		X	X
Shop 15		X	1	X			X
Shop 16		X	1	X			X
Shop 17		X	1	X			
Shop 18		X	1				X
Shop 19	1,2	X	1	X			X
Shop 20	1,2	X	1	X			X
Shop 21		X	1	X			
Shop 22		X	1	X			X

	Large space (1), wide door-opening (2)	No threshold	Curtain (1), door (2), sliding door (2)	Loose seat	Grip	Lowered clothes hooks	Full-frontal mirror inside fitting room
Shop 23	1,2	X	1				X
Shop 24		X	1				
Shop 25		X	2				
Shop 26		X	1	X			X
Shop 27		X	1	X			X
Shop 28		X	1	X			
Shop 29	1	X	1	X			X
Shop 30	2	X	1	X			X
Shop 31	2	X	1				X
Shop 32	2	X	1				X
Shop 33		X	1	X			X
Shop 34	2	X	1	X			

	Large space (1), wide door-opening (2)	No threshold	Curtain (1), door (2), sliding door (2)	Loose seat	Grip	Lowered clothes hooks	Full-frontal mirror inside fitting room
Shop 35	2	X	1	X			X
Shop 36		X	1	X			
Shop 37	2	X	1				X
Shop 38	2	X	1	X		X	X
Shop 39	1,2	X	3	X			X
Shop 40	1,2	X	1	X			X
Shop 41	1,2	X	1	X			X
Shop 42	2	X	1				X
Shop 43		X	1	X			
Shop 44	1,2	X	3	X		X	X
Shop 45		X	1	X			X
Shop 46	1,2	X	1	X	X		X
Shop 47	2	X	1	X			
Shop 48		X	2				

	Large space (1), wide door-opening (2)	No threshold	Curtain (1), door (2), sliding door (2)	Loose seat	Grip	Lowered clothes hooks	Full-frontal mirror inside fitting room
Shop 49		X	1	X			
Shop 50		X	1	X			X
Shop 51	2	X	1	X			X
Shop 52		X	X				

8.2. Appendix B: Pictures of fitting room accessories in the visited shops



Figure 8.2.1



Figure 8.2.2



Figure 8.2.3



Figure 8.2.4: “So a fitting room with natural day light like the one we saw earlier with a dome above it, that is ideal” (Vanessa).

8.3. *Appendix C: Renders of a humanised fitting room, by Robin Julien*

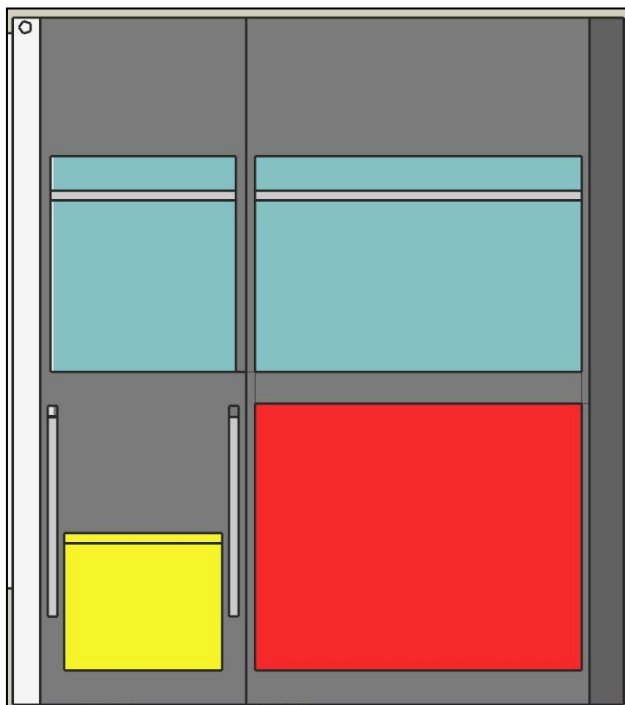


Figure 8.3.1

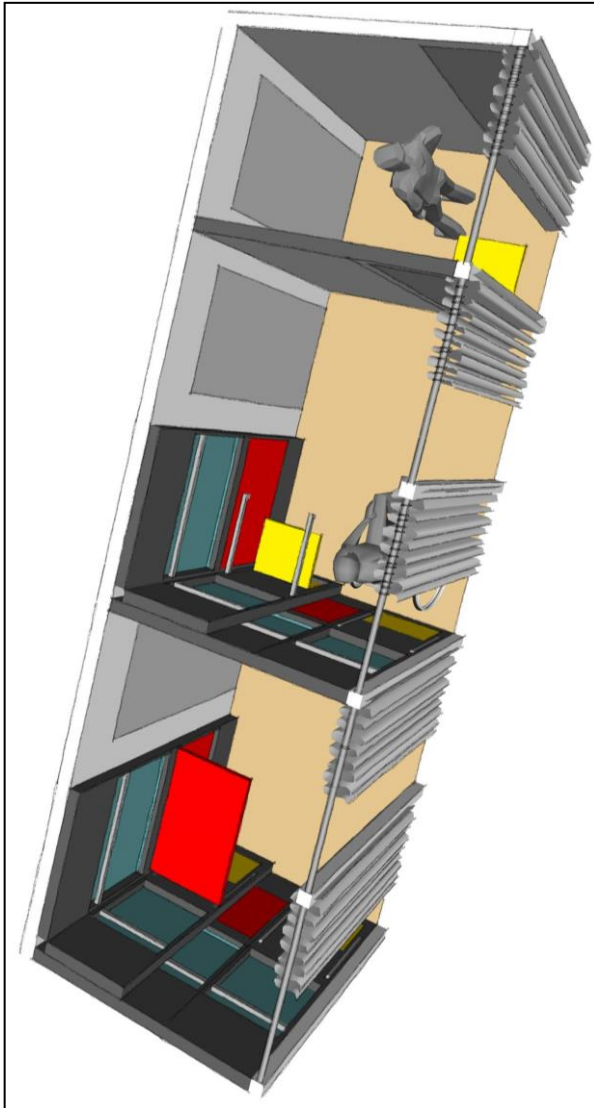


Figure 8.3.2

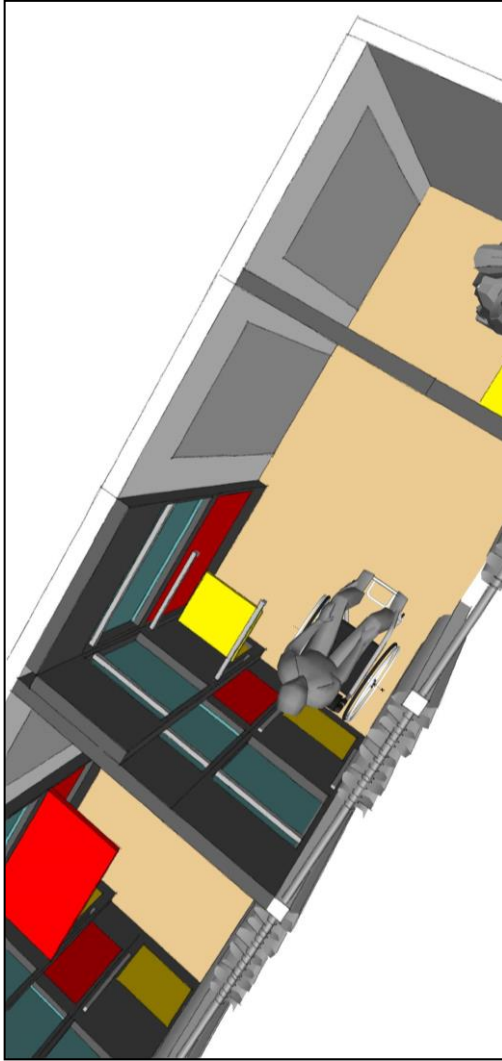


Figure 8.3.3



Figure 8.3.4

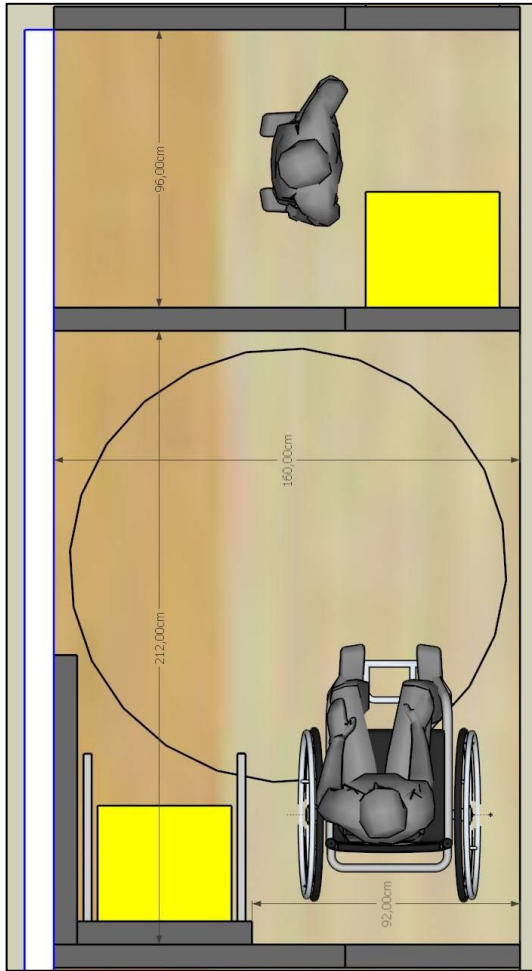


Figure 8.3.5

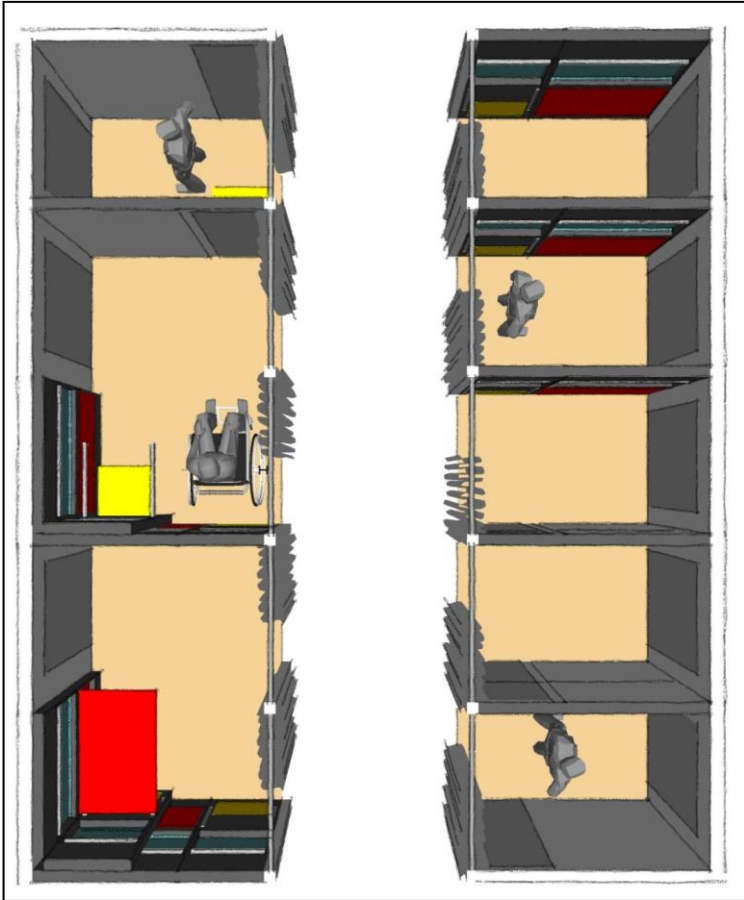


Figure 8.3.6