

This is a 2019 adaptation of the website

<http://accessibleicon.org/>

plus some of:

<https://ablersite.org/>

to spread the ideology behind the stickers

The Accessible Icon Project is an ongoing work of [design activism](#). It starts with a graphic icon, [free for use](#) in the public domain, and continues its work as a collaboration among people with disabilities and their allies [toward a more accessible world](#).

### **An Icon is a Verb:**

About the Project by Sara Hendren, Feb. 2016

How do accessible cities thrive? And how would you “edit” an existing city to make it more inclusive? Brian Glenney and I were asking this question when we started altering public signs marking wheelchair-accessible parking—the blue and white icons designating the so-called “handicapped” spots.

On my web site, [Abler](#), I'd started collecting icons with more design integrity [back in 2010](#). They were rare, but they were present—in high design places like museums, and at ordinary businesses, like my local Marshalls in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The original International Symbol of Access, designed in the 1960s by Susanne Koefoed. Its provisions are historic and profound. But its rectilinear geometry doesn't show the organic body moving through space, like the rest of the standard isotype icons you see in public space. The sliding doors at Marshalls have a wheelchair-riding icon that shows the figure moving through space, with motion lines to show its movement.



The difference between two icons like these was so striking to me that I couldn't believe the second one (and others that are closely similar) wasn't used more commonly.



Brian and I had been collaborating on other projects at the same time, so he suggested that we do something to alter the existing signs. His own background in graffiti immediately brought to mind spray paint options, but we decided it would be better to mess around with decals or

stickers. It started with experiments like this: We tried things like this: placing sticky vinyl figures and heads on top of the chair signs as an early prototype.

It ended up, in 2011, with a clear-backed square sticker - this one, that would be transposed right on top of the original, to show the old image and the new one simultaneously:



This image feels like the heart of the project: a clear-backed sticker that shows the newer figure—here in red and orange, leaning forward, “italicized,” while the original image shows underneath.



Applying these stickers around Boston started as a street art campaign—nothing more or less. We knew that editing the old signs as graffiti would pose questions more provocatively than a “better” icon, rendered professionally. And we knew that better icons already existed.

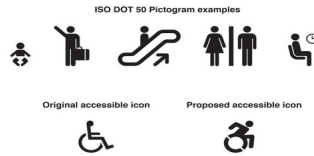
Instead, we wanted this icon-action to be the occasion for asking questions about disability and the built environment, in the largest sense. Who has access—physically, yes, but moreover, to education, to meaningful citizenship, to political rights? Framing this work as a street art campaign allowed it to live as a question, rather than a resolved proposition. At least at the outset.

Since 2011, we’ve gotten some press coverage for the work, and that coverage has brought us into conversation with people all over the world who are advocating for disability rights in many forms, in quite different contexts from the city of Boston.

Making those connections has outpaced our expectations for this work by a hundredfold. Those newfound collaborators have also told us that they wanted a new formal icon to replace the old ones, not just a street art design. So the project grew from guerilla activism to a social design project: *The Accessible Icon Project*. We partnered with [Tim Ferguson Sauder](#), a professional graphic designer, to bring our icon in line with professional standards. We worked with our extended team, including self-advocates with disabilities and allies, to iterate through various possibilities, shown strewn over a table on paper here, for the final icon.



Our final icon in white on blue, to keep to the standard color scheme of the original. Now there's just one wheel, but with two cutouts to emphasize its motion and make it easy to stencil. You can see here the ISO DOT 50 standard icons you'd find all over the built environment: for elevators, restrooms, and more. Figures and limbs have rounded, organic ends, mimicking the look of human bodies. We think the new icon adheres to the logic of these standard icons in a complementary, legible way—an “edit” of the important original.



And we put it in the public domain, so we've never made any money on it. It's an image that's free for appropriation.

by Sara Hendren, 2015

## What is design activism?

Design activism uses the language of design to create political debate. Instead of solving problems in the manner of industrial design, or organizing forms as in graphic design, activist design creates a series of questions or proposals using artifacts or media for unresolved ends: to provoke, or question, or experiment in search of new political conditions. The point of these artifacts is contestation, not a tidy fix.

We're inspired by design activism like [ACTUP](#), [Kissing Doesn't Kill](#), or any number of historical [street art political campaigns](#).

## Why do you think of this project as activism?

It's easy to look at our icon and assume that it's a graphic design project. We get a lot of questions about the features of the icon itself and why ours is “better” than any other. But the graphic is actually a very small fraction of the work. As we've said from the beginning, the icon has been informally redesigned many times. We weren't the first to change it. Our project began precisely by [noticing the differences among icons already in existence](#).

Our project is an activist work because we started as a street art campaign, knowing that the mildly transgressive action of altering public property would engage potential media coverage about the legal status of graffiti. We used that media interest in graffiti's legality to then shape our interviews to our own

agenda: the politics of disability, access, and inclusion. Like the artist/activist collective [WochenKlausur](#), we've noticed that the most deserving "social goods" stories don't get nearly the same press coverage as cultural projects (especially where audiences can debate the "cultural" merits of a work!).

Disability is subject to the same political invisibility and echo chambers as that of other minority groups, and too much direct activist work around disability is targeted toward people who already think disability rights are important. We wanted ideas about disability to reach a wider public, to be a matter of debate that's harder to ignore. And in the most successful cases, we got journalists to talk to self-advocates with disabilities who rarely get a microphone for their wishes.

The design of the first graphic itself was also activist in nature—not a new "solution," at least at the beginning. We debated long and hard about what the icon should look like for the first street sign campaign, and we eventually arrived at the clear-back version, which shows both the old and new icons at once. We knew that it wouldn't be enough to make a change to a "better" icon. Instead, we wanted to have a graphic that was an enigma, or a question. Sustaining that question—in the form of collaborations, events, writing, exhibitions, and more—has been the activist heartbeat of the project.

### **Well—? Is it street art? Or is it design?**

It's both. We started as a street art campaign, and that phase of the work is what got us on the radar of likeminded advocates. But eventually people started asking us for a formal new icon, one that would replace old icons wholesale and be a public signal about an organization/school/company's wish to be inclusive in its practices. That's why [Tim Ferguson-Sauder](#) brought our icon in line with other formal infrastructural symbols you'll see in public spaces everywhere. Our design is in the public domain, so now it's used far and wide, in places we've never seen or heard about.

When we talk about this work, we're transparent about the fact that a single project can span a continuum between a new artifact and a new set of conditions. Between ordinary graphic design and design activism. Letting the work live along that continuum allows it to be both an ongoing, long-term activist work and a free artifact that's useful for simple graphics.

**Not everyone is a wheelchair athlete. What about people who don't push their chairs with their own arms?**

Right. We've talked about this at length in all of our interviews, and it almost never gets included in the final cut. The arm pushing a chair is symbolic—as all icons are symbols, not literal representations. Our symbol speaks to the general primacy of personhood, and to the notion that the person first decides how and why s/he will navigate the world, in the broadest literal and metaphorical terms. To us, this evokes the disability rights mantra that demands “nothing about us without us.”

**I identify as disabled, but I don't use a chair. Why should that symbol speak for all kinds of accessibility?**

It's certainly an interesting question to consider how other symbols might stand in for or supplement the International Symbol of Access. We've spoken to designers about taking up that challenge as a thought project.

But consider the importance of a highly standardized and internationally recognizable symbol. It guarantees that its use will signal the availability of similar accommodations wherever it appears, and its reliable color combination and scale make it easy to spot on a crowded city street, or in an airport. Icons are standardized, 2D, and high contrast for a reason: to make them readily visible to anyone, anywhere. There's power in that.

**It's just an image. Isn't this just political correctness? Or: shouldn't you be using your efforts on something more worthwhile, like real change?**

We get this question a lot. And we're certainly sensitive to one of the pitfalls of design work: an excessive emphasis on the way things look, without attention to other material conditions. From the project's beginning, we've been interested in political and cultural change in the way disability is understood by multiple publics. And we're aware that many people have been agitating for disability rights through direct activism for many decades.

We see this work as a counterpart to that history of direct action. And we think that symbolic activism—creative practices that are also political—do a work that can be hard to quantify but that also makes a difference. History shows that the shape and form of what we see and hear does work on our cognitive understanding of the world, and hence the meaning we make of it. For good and for ill, governments and institutions and protestors and dictators

and individual citizens have long been using the language of symbols to persuade, to question, to force. We want to be on the bottom-up, rights-expanding, power-re-balancing tradition of that history.

**So what's the goal here? Universal sign change?**

We're happy when people write to us that their town or city wants to formally adopt the icon, and from news that politicians officially endorse its use. But success for us isn't really located in the ubiquity of the icon itself. We want to see the icon stand for funding, rights provisions and guarantees, policies, and overall better conditions for people with disabilities. And we want this web site to track and document the progress of those harder goals.

**Don't you worry that this will be shallow activism, like "sign-washing"?**

Sure. This is a big worry for us. Our icon is in the public domain, and that status is important to us. So we can't really control when it gets used as a shallow glad-handing exercise that has no real political traction. But we're trying, with this site and the way we speak elsewhere about the work, to emphasize the substantive efforts of people who don't make the news as easily as a shiny new symbol.

**Do you identify as disabled? Are you an ally? Does it matter?**

We've always had people on our team who identify as disabled, and others of us who are immediate family members or direct co-workers of people who identify as disabled. It matters, of course, that we do this work and any work in disability as a "nothing about us without us" effort. Having said that: allyship also matters, and this project should be seen as one among many efforts to make new connections among new audiences who've seen disability as ignorable or irrelevant. We know from experience that we need much, much larger cultural conversations about disability to happen, including among people whose lives disability has not yet politicized.

**Wow, you're opinionated. Anything else you want to say?**

A wise adviser told us, some years into this project, that any effort to create new and different forms of access will necessarily close off access of other kinds. We know that a wheelchair icon doesn't stand for all kinds of ability. We know that our icon is being used in ways we don't fully endorse. We know that this project's birth in the US conditions our understanding in a way that's culturally limited. And we know that we can't control the journalistic

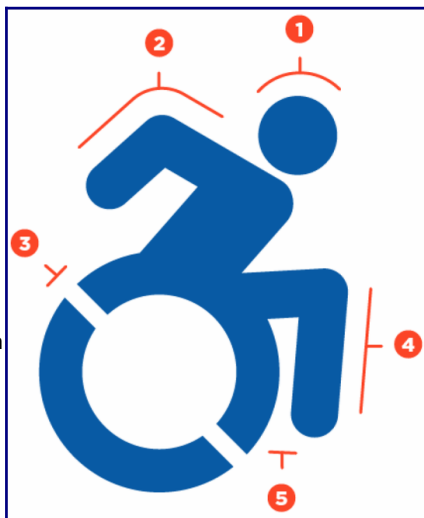
treatment of this story. But the overwhelmingly positive response we've gotten from those of you who've reached out to us in the last five years is evidence that you see something in this work that you recognize. We hope that's true for another five and beyond.

### **against re-branding; against placebo politics**

The [Accessible Icon Project](#) was the subject of the most recent episode of [99% Invisible](#), a podcast about overlooked design and architecture. I spoke at length to the super smart and thoughtful [Lauren Ober](#) about the project—its history and its aims—and I'm pleased that the show gave its famously perceptive treatment to the work.

[As I've said before](#), there are invariably aspects of the project that end up on the cutting room floor; this is natural to journalism and to storytelling in general. Often what's emphasized about the icon project is the graphic itself—why it's different, and why we want to change it. Even with great story coverage like 99% Invisible's, that emphasis starts to sound a lot like efforts to “rebrand” the icon—and I've increasingly heard the work described as such. I'm against that language for a bunch of reasons, and I want to explore why.

As I've said to every media producer who's written about the project, we weren't the first ones to re-imagine it, and we've never claimed otherwise. We've never even been \*interested\* in “firstness.” The project's [very origins](#) were in casually collecting old and newer versions of the icon—ones I'd see by chance in the built environment in various settings, like this:



The project has had a social aim from the beginning. Yes, we delivered a new graphic design, but it was the publicness and the action around changing signage—and all the objections and skepticism that we got along the way—that have yielded the restless and

unfinished conversation I consider to be the living pulse and grounding of the work. It was a social set of actions, starting with this image below—the image that still feels to me like the strongest representation of the project.



It's precisely the *un-resolve* of this image that makes it interesting—and impossible to harness as a brand identity. Brands are about graphic logos that “pop,” about memorability by association, about using a clear and wholesale repetition that creates a smooth transition to new and clean idea, devoid of friction. I think we were right to end up with an image that could be distributed widely and used as a new icon—the one that begins this post. But the graphic is *not the destination of the work*. The destination is a thousand invisible—and, I hope, eventually visible—acts of structural and cultural change: in global rights, in abuse prevention, in meaningfully inclusive schools and workplaces.

Now—naturally—I've asked myself multiple times whether it's not ultimately better to fall in line with a marketing mentality: If it gets more people aware of and interested in the ideas at the heart of the project, then why not? Shouldn't a clarity of vision, a *smoothness*—the opposite of that friction—characterize the change we want to see in the world? The problem, I think, is the tendency of marketing logics—when applied to enormous, complicated issues like disability rights—to yield merely [placebo politics](#).

That's the term artist Benjamin Bratton used in [his piece in the Guardian](#) decrying another kind of smoothness: the TED platform's strict and scripted narrative form, almost irrespective of the topic, pointing toward “tidy and just-so solutions” to the world's most intractable problems.

Bratton isn't the first to diagnose TED's shortcomings: its breathless worship of technological Disruption and Innovation and the rest. But he's the first to challenge its willingness, on the one hand, to justifiably exclude “placebo science” and “placebo medicine” from the list of acceptable talk subjects—while refusing to look critically at the “placebo politics” it lauds as “game-changing,” revelatory socio-political ideas. Here's Bratton:



The key rhetorical device for TED talks is a combination of epiphany and personal testimony (an “epiphimony” if you like ) through which the speaker shares a personal journey of insight and realisation, its triumphs and tribulations. What is it that the TED audience hopes to get from this? A vicarious insight, a fleeting moment of wonder, an inkling that maybe it's all going to work out after all? A spiritual buzz?

I'm sorry but this fails to meet the challenges that we are supposedly here to confront. These are complicated and difficult and are not given to tidy just-so solutions. They don't care about anyone's experience of optimism. Given the stakes, making our best and brightest waste their time - and the audience's time - dancing like infomercial hosts is too high a price. It is cynical.

Problems are not “puzzles” to be solved. That metaphor assumes that all the necessary pieces are already on the table, they just need to be rearranged and reprogrammed. It's not true. If we really want transformation, we have to slog through the hard stuff (history, economics, philosophy, art, ambiguities, contradictions). Bracketing it off to the side to focus just on technology, or just on innovation, actually *prevents* transformation.

The hard stuff—friction, a willingness to embody and suspend *un-resolve*—these are essential to making the icon count for *rights*, for substantive change. I remain against re-branding, and eagerly look for the messy, hard slog of change to come.

***Comments:***

So smart! I love this! But here's the challenge: words and images (and TED programs for that matter) are necessary shorthand for conveying new ideas. How do we convey the process, the messiness, in a way that brings in new allies in the struggle? In other words, might messiness be a luxury, a privilege, a counter-intuitive means of maintaining control or not assuming responsibility? I completely applaud your point and share the critique, but I'm wanting the messiness to be available to all as something that opens doors rather than causing us to turn away. How?



This is my adaptation of the logo to emphasize my ideology:  
I am the only authority on my capabilities, please leave me alone; I am capable of asking for help if I want or need help. So piss off I don't want you to save me from a problem you are imagining.

1. This is not just for people with disabilities, it intersects with sexism and other oppression.
2. With regards,

[fhttp://fakkelplemp.nl/](http://fakkelplemp.nl/)