

# Progressive Architecture

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Barrier-free design

Figure 1. Cover of the April 1978 issue of *Progressive Architecture* with view of library patron in wheelchair using circulation and reference counter (which also serves as a hand-guide) on the first floor of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, ca. 1978. Photograph by Philip Turner.

## Banking on Postmodernism Saving Stanley Tigerman's Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (1978)

In summer 2018, the La Jolla Historical Society, a venerable local institution in San Diego, California, rescued a collection of wayward postmodern objects from the dustbin of history.<sup>1</sup> For two decades, a phalanx of oversized, cartoonish Corinthian columns designed in 1996 by Venturi Scott Brown as part of an expansive renovation for the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, had been a recognizable component of the museum's façade. Many argued that the exaggerated columns both honored and mocked the original house, designed in 1916 by Irving Gill for Ellen Browning Scripps, and obscured Robert Mosher's 1960 thoughtful expansion of Browning's house into a larger museum complex, including an elegant midcentury auditorium venue. When the museum launched a 2016 capital campaign to expand (yet again) its exhibition and meeting spaces, over seventy prominent architects, educators, and preservationists overlooked the destruction of Mosher's contributions to the site, choosing instead to focus their ire on the museum's plans to revamp Venturi Scott Brown's work.<sup>2</sup> By August 2018, as debates about the future of the museum played out across board meetings, classrooms, and social media, the colonnade of bloated Corinthians was lifted quietly by a giant crane and deposited in a public garden space less than a block away, giving them a new lease on life for yet another generation.

Acts of architectural preservation, like acts of museum curation, are never value neutral. For critics like Aaron Betsky, the case for preserving Venturi Scott Brown's work has less to do with the quality of the design itself and more with the seductive allure of "starchitecture" associated with those iconic practitioners of postmodernism, for whom the museum was their sole San Diego project. As Betsky argued in *Architect* in 2018, "Some buildings are just bad, by any set of criteria you might use, no matter what style or how old they might be, or who might have designed them. Defending them because 'it represents a key part of the duo's oeuvre . . . because it is by Venturi Scott Brown' . . . only weakens the case for good architecture."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, one could argue that the urge to fetishize the firm's work and burnish its legacy has become especially poignant since Venturi died in September 2018. Yet we might ask: *what*, exactly, about Venturi Scott Brown's work for the museum has been preserved when one of its most

recognizable features—the Corinthian colonnade—has been displaced to a site for which it was never intended, like an Egyptian obelisk installed among the hedgerows of a Georgian estate?

Practices of architectural preservation, like archival practice or curatorial practice, establish narratives of importance and hierarchies of value that determine not only what is worthy of preservation but what counts as central to historical accounts of an architect, a client, a movement, or a moment in time. Certainly the unconscionable destruction or abandonment of James Wines’s BEST Products Company showrooms—those intrepid, collapsing semiotic structures memorialized by critic Margaret McCormick as “the apex of American Postmodernism” in the 1970s—affirm that not all buildings of a certain vintage are valued equally.<sup>4</sup> Ontologically speaking, then, the buildings as well as the “stuff” that is saved by some preservation efforts may be less about supporting a complex and nuanced history of postmodern architecture and more about sustaining the authority of critics for whom certain tenets of architectural historicism have been fixed, as if pickled in a jar of formaldehyde.

Although not strictly an act of architectural preservation, the conversion of Chicago’s former Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped—designed in the mid-1970s by the late Stanley Tigerman (1930–2019)—into the flagship branch of a regional financial institution provides a telling example of the kind of shallow architectural rhetoric that often gets privileged when a building near demise is rescued under the auspices of preservation. Pappageorge Haymes Partners, the Chicago-based architectural firm responsible for transforming the former library into a bank, vigorously defended its choice to preserve certain stylistic elements of Tigerman’s building and thus its status as an iconic (and, not insignificantly, a *local*) example of 1970s postmodernism. But is the building’s significance solely defined by those stylistic elements that can be historicized through the recognizable conventions of postmodernism? Or are there other elements of Tigerman’s original design that have been erased in the conversion process—elements, both aesthetic and political, which may have the capacity to transform how we historicize postmodernism?

Both during his lifetime and following his death in June 2019, Tigerman’s work was and continues to be acknowledged for its dry humor and semiotic play, a way of both mocking and distilling formalistic elements and mythic ideas not unlike Venturi or Wines or even Paul Rudolph, one of Tigerman’s professors when he was an architecture student at Yale in the late 1950s. But whereas the reputations of figures like Venturi were galvanized by challenging early-twentieth-century

modernism — captured famously in his antimodernist declaration “less is a *bore*,” his arch appropriation of Mies van der Rohe’s well-known dictum — Tigerman saw his architectural projects in the 1970s as an opportunity to revisit modernism’s influence while also embracing, and even stirring up, an inevitable backlash against it. Tigerman, in this sense, prefigured Frederic Jameson’s observation that what we call “the postmodern” does not so much mark an end to the movement known as “the modern” per se as much as it marks a recurring and continuing flow of the concept of periodization itself.<sup>5</sup> It is a form of historicity that strikes over and over again, *ad nauseum*, exposing periodization as a useful fiction that never truly ends (and/or perhaps never even begins). As Nathan Brown has observed, “The term ‘postmodernism’ no longer seems to tell us much about the present.”<sup>6</sup>

In the following essay, I endeavor to show how Tigerman’s starting point for the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped (hereafter IRLBPH) was a spatially and sensorially empathic approach to the experience of disability that enabled him to rescript the terms of architectural modernism. This is an interpretive position inspired by the rigorous historical work of contemporary scholars such as Jos Boys, Elizabeth Guffey, Aimi Hamraie, Rob Imrie, Wanda Liebermann, Barbara Penner, Graham Pullin, and Bess Williamson, all of whom have reexamined works of mid- and late-twentieth-century architecture and design through the critical lens of disability.<sup>7</sup> Like many of his peers during the 1960s and 1970s, Tigerman became increasingly interested in exploring architectural features that encouraged or at least facilitated sensual and even erotic spatial encounters.<sup>8</sup> But Tigerman’s approach to the IRLBPH, as I argue, paid tribute to the formal elements of modernism while also leaving the doors wide open to something beyond modernism. Thus, rather than assuming that it is “postmodernism” — or Lakeside Bank’s fantasy of it — that will tell us what makes the IRLBPH as a building tick, it may prove more fruitful to try to situate Tigerman’s original design alongside other architectural histories that run adjacent to but are distinct from the totalizing effects of postmodernism’s explanatory power. By focusing on what was lost in Lakeside’s conversion of Tigerman’s original design, we not only gain a more sophisticated critical apparatus for assessing the status of postmodernism; we also move disability from the margins of design history to its rightful place among assessments of late-twentieth-century architecture for the purposes of thinking about historic preservation.

It may seem like a luxury to talk about the canons of postmodern architecture when local and national governments,

guided by austerity measures, seek increasingly to dismantle economic support and even legal protections for people with disabilities.<sup>9</sup> These threats are far more insidious than the missed opportunities of architectural preservation. Still, broadly speaking, conversations about best practices for preserving architectural histories, including those related to disability history in whatever form they take, are political practices precisely because of their relationship to the spatial experience of disability. One thinks of, for instance, the political stature accorded to the Hôtel national des Invalides, created in Paris by a 1670 edict from Louis XIV to house aging and infirm veterans of French wars.<sup>10</sup> As Beatriz Colomina has shown in her close readings of iconic hospital architecture such as Josef Hoffmann's Purkersdorf Sanitarium in Vienna (1904) and Alvar Aalto's Paimio Sanitorium in Paimio, Finland (1933), the scientific (some would say eugenic) management of public health crises like tuberculosis were carried out through modernist design practices.<sup>11</sup> In the United States, architectural and disability histories have been routinely linked through successive waves of civil rights discourse: from the site of the outdoor water pump at Ivy Green (1820), Helen Keller's ancestral home in Tusculum, Alabama, to the cement curb cut, carved in 1978 from a Denver sidewalk by disabled activists wielding sledgehammers, preserved at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.<sup>12</sup> The recently discovered example of the Kenneth and Phyllis Laurent House—designed in the late 1940s by Frank Lloyd Wright in Rockford, Illinois, and designated as a landmark in 2012—is a spectacularly well-preserved private home and the only one for which Wright's primary client was a wheelchair user. Wright adapted one of his Usonian houses and designed furniture to produce an open-flow floor plan of obstacle-free living spaces, enlarged bathroom spaces for toileting and showering, lowered kitchen counters and cabinets, and wheelchair-ready built-in desks and vanity tables. The Laurent House not only preserves the historical significance of a late-period Wright house but also preserves a design that facilitated spatial autonomy nearly two decades before the Independent Living Movement emerged in the US in the early 1970s. Other buildings in the United States exhibiting this enmeshment of architectural and disability histories before the 1970s—such as Denver's Charles Boettcher School for Crippled Children (built 1938; demolished 1993), a masterpiece of empathic and inclusive design by regional architect Burnham Hoyt—have been lost to time, even if their legacies remain safeguarded in the archive.<sup>13</sup>

Stanley Tigerman's innovative work for the IRLBPH has often appeared in surveys of contemporary architecture, both as a unique artifact of late 1970s US architecture as well as a



unique artifact of Tigerman's *oeuvre*. Even before it formally opened in spring 1978, the IRLBPH was lauded in both the national and international press as well as in influential period publications like *Progressive Architecture* and *Design Quarterly* (see Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> *A+U*, the monthly Japanese architectural journal, devoted an entire section of its July 1976 issue to a retrospective of Tigerman's most well-known works up to that time and concluded with an overview of proposed plans for the IRLBPH.<sup>15</sup> Throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, the library garnered Tigerman numerous industry awards and professional citations, reflecting a growing recognition among architects and urban planners that building for equal access was an unfulfilled promise of the civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, the IRLBPH had been abandoned by local and state authorities and fell into noticeable disrepair. Its original mandate—to serve as a centralized reading and distribution hub, branch library, and community space for library patrons who were blind or partially sighted, and/or those who used a wheelchair—had become all but irrelevant. The arrival of voice-operated reading software and widespread access to deep databases at the touch of a button, along with the affordability of portable devices like laptops and MP3 players, had supplanted the necessity of a physical site outfitted with thousands of books in Braille, large print, and cassette and LP formats. Meanwhile, the expansion of residential and commercial interests into Chicago's West Loop, especially the neighborhoods of Little Italy and the University of Illinois at Chicago, had increasingly galvanized speculation in both built and unbuilt sites in and around the library as potential engines of urban redevelopment and gentrification.

In 2012, Lakeside Bank, a regional financial institution, purchased the library building from the state after it had lay fallow for nearly a decade and transformed it into the bank's flagship headquarters. The firm of Pappageorge Haymes Partners was hired to complete the renovation, a provocative choice since one of the firm's two principals, George Pappageorge, was not only a member of Lakeside's board of trustees but had been a student of Tigerman's when the architect taught at the Illinois Institute of Technology, the modernist campus master-planned by Mies van der Rohe less than four miles from the IRLBPH. Pappageorge Haymes Partners committed itself to the conversion process by publicly recognizing the historical importance of the library's design, asserting that any changes "were carefully measured to sympathize with the building's primary forms and essential character, while meeting the needs of its new commercial occupant."<sup>16</sup> But what did the firm mean by its reference to the building's "primary forms and essential character"?



Figure 2. Public entrance (center) and parking lot of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978, with “gateway” to site (top left) formed by rounded sheet metal structure opposite library entrance. Photograph by Philip Turner and sourced from *Design Quarterly* 105 (1978), Walker Arts Center.

To be clear, Lakeside’s contemporary conversion of the IRLBPH is fully accessible to bank patrons, complying with guidelines for commercial properties under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, which took effect a dozen years after the library first opened. And some functional alterations—such as replacing the library’s original sheet-metal eastern exposure with a glass curtain wall incorporating a drive-thru lane and teller bank window—update Tigerman’s design without compromising structural or conceptual integrity (Figures 2 and 3). In the end, however, the conversion eliminated or else damaged beyond recognition many of the features that Tigerman created specifically for library users with sensory and mobility impairments—features that are arguably central to the IRLBPH’s “primary forms and essential character.” Reflecting in 2013, for instance, Tigerman observed that some of his test subjects for the library found moveable furniture “very difficult, so we fixed everything instead. And used a linear plan so they could flow down the line of the building, engaging their other senses, their tactile senses, while feeling safe.”<sup>17</sup> Except for a minuscule remnant of the original circulation desk that now serves as a privacy wall (Figure 4), Lakeside removed all built-ins, along with Tigerman’s original choice of black Pirelli rubber floor tiles embossed with



Figure 3. Public entrance (center) to Lakeside Bank with view of converted glass wall and drive-thru teller window (left). Photograph taken July 2019 by Brian Selznick.

raised bumps throughout the library, a prescient use of tactile surfaces decades ahead of its time. The bank also repainted the former library’s interior and exterior spaces with the bank’s signature colors of “neutral white with blue accents,” thereby stripping Tigerman’s choice of “Mondrian-like” primary colors — red for perimeter walls, yellow for structural system, blue for ventilation and mechanical — to help visually impaired patrons navigate the site.<sup>18</sup> And in a final blow to Tigerman’s original design, in the late 2010s the bank removed the bulbous, convex “gateway” marker on the Roosevelt Road side of the property, the brightly colored entry point for patrons as well as Tigerman’s wry nod to Louis Kahn-like monumentalism. We might ask, then: what does it mean to “sympathize” with a building’s “primary forms and essential character” when a firm committed to preserving it alters irrevocably its relationship to the very thing — the experience of disability — that facilitated the project’s conceptual orientation toward that design in the first place?

Tigerman came of age professionally in the early 1960s among an ascendant generation of architects who, as Barbara Penner has written, saw a need for “more complex and sensorially rich spaces.” Penner argues that these architects’ commitments to using design to cultivate new forms of empathy and generating new forms of sensorial complexity provide evidence that challenges the reductive idea that “postmodern





Figure 4. Surviving remnant of the library's original circulation and reference counter on the first floor, now used as privacy wall for bank employees. Photograph taken July 2019 by David Serlin.

architecture's defining characteristics were always ambivalence, surface irony, and formal game-playing."<sup>19</sup> Tigerman's original plan for the IRLBPH deployed an impressive array of spatial and sensorial devices that draw upon the then-fashionable idea of built forms as semiotic systems: from the mimetic function of the original two-car garage designed for library staff with Pop Art exterior and gull-wing doors (demolition date unknown) to the metonymic effect of the 165-foot waveform window that is emulated in the smooth continuous surface of the massive circulation and reference counter (Figure 5).<sup>20</sup> For Tigerman, the interactions of signifier and signified were not just one-note jokes caught up in the self-satisfied smirk of postmodern cleverness. Rather, they were empathic, albeit highly performative, gestures for rethinking the experience of disability as a neglected resource for expanding humanistic design. The deliberately odd mismatch of contextual elements resulted in a kind of delighted disorientation, not at the expense of a library patron with disabilities but with one held firmly in mind. As Paul Goldberger observed in 1978, "Tigerman was searching constantly for materials and form that would satisfy his own visual sense of duty, yet somehow convey the idea of beauty equally well to users who could understand it only through shape and texture."<sup>21</sup> The current incarnation of Tigerman's building retains some of these original rhetorical gestures: porthole windows punched into



Figure 5. Northern and western exposures of Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978, from the corner of Roosevelt Road and Blue Island Avenue. Note car-shaped garage under construction, behind dumpster, in left background. Copyright Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Reproduced from the G. E. Kidder Image Collection at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non Commercial 3.0 License.

the elongated and sheet metal outer structure of the second-floor areas, for instance, still create the effect of the bow of an ocean liner, while their elevated position just above the heads of bank employees provides bursts of quasi-clerestory lighting within an industrial container (Figure 6). Meanwhile, the semi-otic relationship forged between the library's western façade and the building's interior, which facilitated a form of inside-outside navigation for the patrons for whom it was originally designed, has disappeared altogether (Figure. 7).

Tigerman's original designs for the IRLBPH were carefully considered in order to meet the needs of the library as a particular building typology: after all, libraries are by needs both more generic and also more specific than other types of public spaces. But they are also designed to be more than mere repositories of books—as much a motivating factor for nineteenth-century philanthropists like Andrew Carnegie, who hired architects to design local branch libraries as temples of civic virtue, as it was for contemporary architects like Rem Koolhaas, who redesigned and reopened Seattle's award-winning Central Library (2004), originally a Carnegie structure, as a new civic public space. When it was originally conceived in the late 1960s, the IRLBPH was intended to function for three distinct though overlapping populations: (1) a local and regional branch lending library and distribution center for Braille and large-print books and magazines, along with books recorded to cassettes and LPs, on the first floor; (2) a community-oriented social space for those in the vicinity, complete with meeting rooms, conference rooms, and areas

Figure 6. Staff lounge on the second floor of the administrative “wing” of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978. Photograph by Philip Turner and published in the April 1978 issue of *Progressive Architecture*.



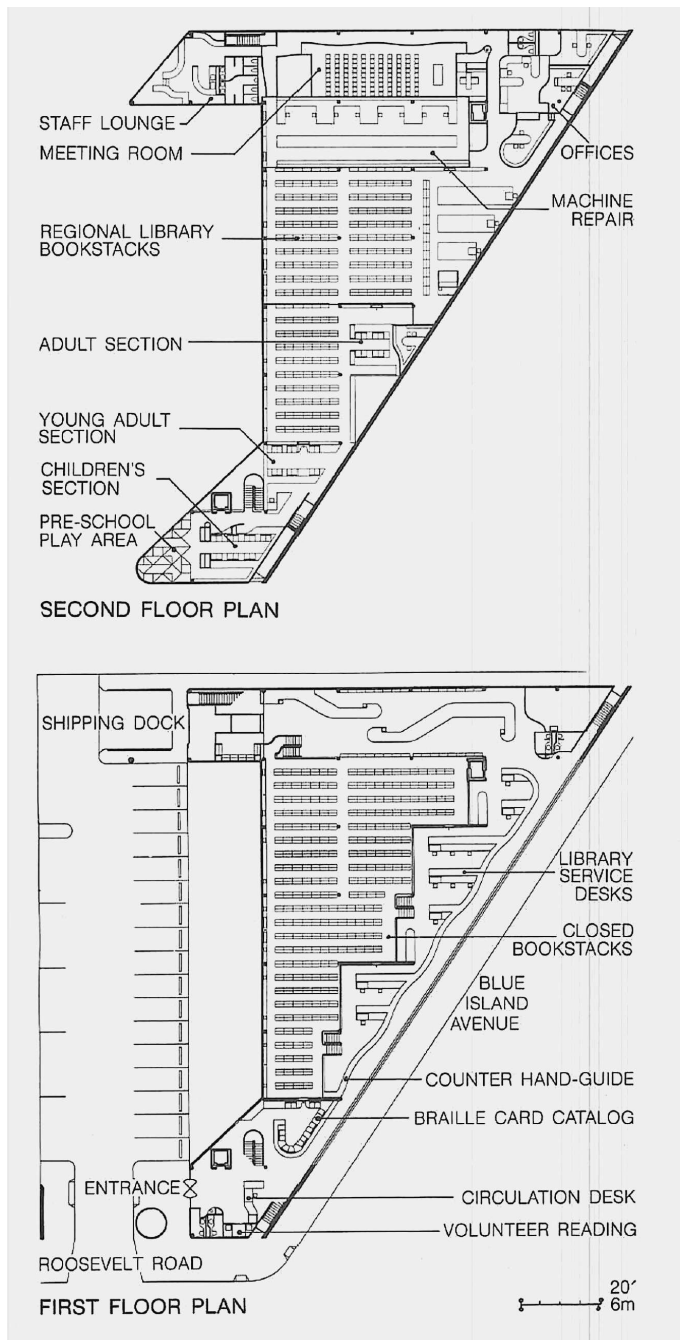
Figure 7. Western wall facing Blue Island Avenue set with waveform window, now used to advertise bank services. Photograph taken July 2019 by Brian Selznick.

for local volunteers to record books to tape; and (3) a small local branch lending library with open stacks and reading areas for adults, teens, and children (Figure 8). Thus, even though the IRLBPH was sited on a parcel of public land that abutted many so-called empty spaces of Chicago’s West Loop, its relationship to and within the community was decidedly different than the fortress-like institutional spaces created by Walter Netsch for the University of Illinois at Chicago’s campus, the Brutalist features of which emerged during the same period that the IRLBPH was being designed and built.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, Tigerman’s library was not intended as a redemptive gesture of municipal white guilt, the kind characterized by Reinhold Martin as typical of cities like Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles in their earnest yet ultimately botched attempts at creating housing projects



Figure 8. Floor plans (first floor on bottom, second floor on top) for the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped. Published in the April 1978 issue of *Progressive Architecture*.



and public facilities for poor and disenfranchised inner-city populations.<sup>23</sup> Long before urban violence and protest erupted in cities like Chicago during the second half of the 1960s, the state of Illinois had already had a long history of commitment to supporting the needs of people with disabilities. This included the printing and circulation of Braille books and newspapers as well as the distribution of the first generation of “talking books” (vinyl records to be played on special phonographs) after those media were funded by an act of Congress

in 1931.<sup>24</sup> As Aimi Hamraie has shown, during the second half of the 1940s the University of Illinois (first at Galesburg, before shifting to its main Urbana-Champaign campus) became the first public university system in the nation to fund new or adapt existing buildings, including classrooms, dormitories, and gymnasiums, for the specific inclusion of disabled veterans on the GI Bill.<sup>25</sup> Disability was thus an acknowledged part of public discourse and funding at the state and city levels; and, although differentially implemented and unequally distributed, some forms of access were addressed at least two decades before more well-known projects galvanized urban redesign in US cities like Berkeley, Denver, and Seattle.

Tigerman's philosophical approach to the IRLBPH is worth quoting at length, not only in terms of the architect's stated goals but also for the ways in which Tigerman deliberately engaged the notion of disabled subjectivity as an inspiration for his design. As he wrote in 1978:

Metaphorical allusions are implicit in a program that is loaded with poignancy (blindness) rather than the current modish thinking that superimposes metaphors on unsuspecting programs. Anthropomorphism abounds (circulatory system "printed" on the building's face and the window shape) and inversions and reversals are everywhere and nowhere (the apparent lightweight steel panels are made opaque while the apparently heavy concrete wall is made transparent through the device of the horizontal, undulating cut). Therefore, the building represents not just the specific program, nor just the general state of the art, but significantly, the author's own schizophrenic, inconclusive struggle with both.<sup>26</sup>

One takes Tigerman's use of "schizophrenic" here not as a prescient gesture of designing for neurodiversity but as a self-effacing comment about the desire to reconcile the needs of people with disabilities with the spatial, economic, and social demands of the site. Importantly, however, Tigerman's design for the IRLBPH was not intended solely to erase typical forms of spatial discrimination for its patrons. Rather, it was intended to *produce* forms of spatial discrimination in the older use of the word: discrimination based on one's aesthetic experience and sensuous apprehension of the world. The 165-foot western exposure wall facing Blue Island Avenue, for instance, embedded with a seemingly gravity-defying, undulating waveform window, was built more or less as a nonrepresentational sculpture or painting projected outward to the entire community (see Figure 5). Once this is spatially understood, users can find and/or memorize the distance to the public entrance to the





Figure 9. Children's reading and play areas on second floor of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978, with built-in seating, display shelving, and open counter space. Photograph by Philip Turner and sourced from *Design Quarterly* 105 (1978), Walker Arts Center.

site. The essential semiotic character of the waveform window is replicated in several of the building's exterior and interior designs: from the pill-shaped lightwells to the undulating reference desk to the public staircase with its curvilinear railing and balustrades to the porthole windows to the exaggerated bracing walls, originally painted canary yellow, that were organized both to support and offset circulation areas and built-in seating arrangements.

Tigerman's interest in the built-in was not merely one that used the architectonic language of fixed structures to address the experiences of disability; rather, he gravitated to them for their dual promise of aesthetic and experiential predictability (Figure 9). For patrons who are partially sighted and/or who are wheelchair users, spatial discrimination can be materialized through fixed features that can be memorized and navigated far more easily than flexible or mobile ones. Consider the person for whom fixed kitchen features and toilet and bathing functions necessitate predictable surfaces and interfaces that can be cognitively mapped even if they cannot be seen. Built-ins placed at a fixed intervals and appropriate height, such as storage spaces or kitchen counters, are not just matters of convenience but transformational tools of domestic autonomy; like ramps connected to a front porch or breezeway, they offer numerous options for circulation between different

kinds of surfaces and spaces. Among contemporary scholars and practitioners of designing for disability, such as Sara Hendren and Graham Pullin, built-in features have been assigned a new status in facilitating more user-centered experiences and, ultimately, a more meaningful disabled *habitus*.<sup>27</sup> *Habitus* is the concept popularized by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to describe those “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” of bodily habits, actions, behaviors, and gestures through which bodies occupy social spaces and through which bodies are identified.<sup>28</sup> Yet, as Tigerman’s design makes clear, aligning bodily habitus with spatial habitus is neither new nor revolutionary. In her history of architectural access before the ADA, for instance, Bess Williamson traces the work of polio survivors living in group settings in Indiana during the late 1950s who developed do-it-yourself techniques for structures, devices, and clothing to improve their domestic arrangements and make them more easily navigable.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Hamraie traces the do-it-yourself design imperatives advocated by architectural educators such as Elaine Ostroff and Raymond Lifchez that drew inspiration from students and disability rights activists in Berkeley and Oakland during the early 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

In the spaces of the IRLBPG, Tigerman’s imaginative use of habitus echoed his delight in aesthetic confrontation, like a waxed eyebrow arched before a laconically phrased observation. But it was also earnest acknowledgment that the experience of disability could serve as inspiration for deliberately controlled spatial experiments. For people who are blind or partially sighted, or for people who use wheelchairs, sustaining a particular disabled habitus is not a constraint on liberty and imagination; rather, it is what makes liberty and imagination possible within a finite range of options. At the curved apex of the second-floor public reading area, for example, and sited beneath four jaunty porthole windows, Tigerman designed a reading section incorporating carpeted play tunnels that invited children to crawl into and find their own private spot away from librarians, teachers, and parents (Figure 10). A child’s experience of having low vision, which for many sighted adults would be presumed to be isolating and terrifying, became in Tigerman’s hands a design inspiration that offered young users the confidence to read Braille books in privacy while enjoying not a small amount of mischief in the process. Sadly, the play structure and tunnels at Lakeside Bank, like the built-in seating arrangements installed throughout the library, disappeared with the swift dissolution of the wrecking ball, extinguishing not only any traces of the building’s former clientele but also anything that presumably reminded its new owners of the disabled experiences marked by such design features (Figure 11).<sup>31</sup>

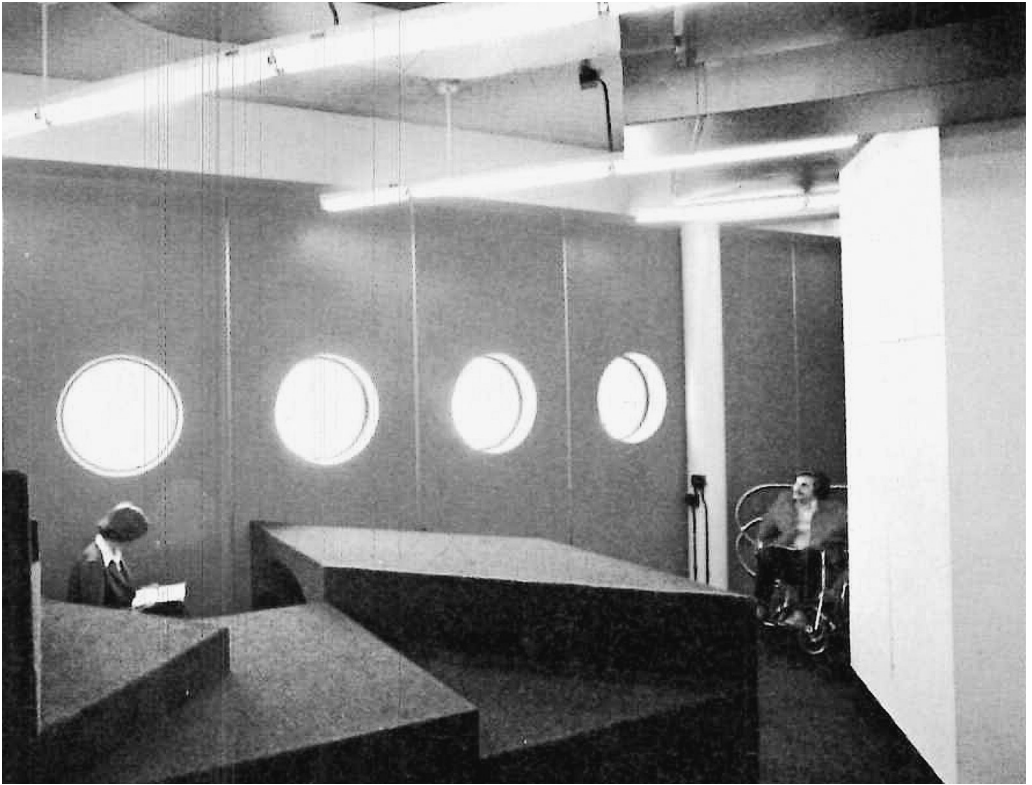


Figure 10. Carpeted multilevel play structure for preschool-age children, complete with tunnels for hiding, in the public reading area on the second-floor of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978. Photograph by Philip Turner and published in the April 1978 issue of *Progressive Architecture*.

For anyone even vaguely familiar with his *oeuvre* during the first half of the 1970s, none of Tigerman's experiments with disabled habitus for the IRLBPH would have been surprising. His Industrial Incubator Building (1971), for example, developed to revitalize a neighborhood in Arlington Heights, Illinois, most resembles the conceptual gestalt of the IRLBPH in its modular construction technique and "inversions and reversals" of exposed systems, including a podlike space with flexible interiors for light industrial work. Other buildings, however, have become dominant in Tigerman lore for their erotic wit, as if dreamed up by the naughty younger brother of John Lautner or Pierre Koenig. The so-called Hot Dog House (1974–75), a euphemistic wooden structure with primary-colored panels designed as a weekend residence in Harvard, Illinois, barely retains its innocence when examined alongside the so-called Daisy House (1976–78), inserted into a stepped hillside in Porter, Indiana, and shaped (depending on one's perspective) like either a penis and testicles or a uterine canal and fallopian tubes (or both). Tigerman even modified the play tunnels he originally designed for the IRLBPH for a wealthy private client's upscale Chicago apartment. Tigerman's Womb Room (1973) was series of multileveled carpeted interior surfaces that combined the erotic potential of the tunnels with the sunken conversation pit, that iconic feature of postwar ex-urban home design; the love child of Paul Rudolph and Hugh Hefner, with



Figure 11. Second-floor elevator landing and conference room (left foreground), former location of the library's second-floor carpeted play structure for preschool-age children (see Figure 10). Photograph taken July 2019 by David Serlin.

more than a generous nod to Ken Adam, the production designer for the early James Bond films.

In spaces like the Womb Room, Tigerman demonstrated that a willing commitment to cultivating new forms of habitus *made possible* by the tools and techniques of architectural modernism was a design solution to embrace, not a design problem to overcome. Yet throughout the 1970s, conceptual and practical challenges to modernisms of both the Miesian and Wrightian varieties — whether in the Panoptic phalluses of Philip Johnson, the bulbous asymmetries of John Hedjuk, or the dissipating façades of James Wines — became the order of the day. In 1978, for instance, Michael A. Jones and John H. Catlin, two architects and rehabilitation specialists working for the state of Illinois, used modernism's reputation for inaccessibility and the civil rights-inspired understanding of spatial discrimination as a way to challenge the tenets of high modernist design: "Buildings with symmetrical plans are also confusing, especially when no attempt is made to distinguish different areas within the building. . . . Cantilevered structures may also create a sense of fear in people and prevent them from using the building."<sup>32</sup> As a result, many designs that we retrospectively might identify as postmodern began to emphasize flexibility and/or portability over what were perceived to be modernism's unyielding formalist tendencies. This is why so much postmodern design in the 1970s often emphasized (however exaggeratedly) materials that advocated portabil-

ity and modularity, an aesthetic embedded in the period's existential restlessness as well as its jet-set aspirations. The habitus imagined — or, perhaps more accurately, the habitus portrayed — by many postmodernist architects was anathema to the poststructuralist goals of freedom, play, and mobility.

Many architects and designers of the era regarded the potential of plastic elements as the solution (both literal and figurative) to the “problem” of designing for the future. For example, at the 1972 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art entitled *Italy, the Domestic Landscape*, Gaetano Pesce, one of the curators, described designers presented within his contribution to the show as offering “a commitment to design as a problem-solving activity.” As Felicity Scott has described, designs included examples of “molded red plastic architectural elements that could be multiply rearranged,” “independent, reorganizable, and predominantly plastic components,” and “gray plastic container units on wheels, understood as neutral, pre-prototypes that could be filed in with different aspects of a domestic program and rearranged.”<sup>33</sup> Such designs were presented as organisms with the DNA of modernism — inexpensive materials and industrial production in the vein of Italian design classics like the Bialetti espresso maker and the Olivetti typewriter — but shown as mutants whose genetic structures could be altered and endlessly recombined into microworlds of individualized discrimination. Yet for all of its calls for liberation from the soul-crunching constraints of high modernism, modular elements may not be a universal good — certainly not for a person whose habitus *depends* on an environment in which unpredictability has been vanquished or at least largely tamed. As David Gissen has argued in his account of his experience navigating the uneven multilevel spaces of Rudolph's original plan for the Yale School of Architecture (1963), the emancipatory claims of postmodern design are rhetorical, not neutral, and are routinely undone by their tacit privileging of ablebodiedness.<sup>34</sup> This is why some of the most iconic buildings of the postmodern era — the disco Brutalism of John Portman's Westin Bonaventure Hotel (1976), for instance, or Philip Johnson's AT&T building (1984), a neoclassical fever dream of blue-blood capitalism, as if Jay Gatsby had designed for it for Restoration Hardware — have been acknowledged, albeit controversially, for their smart-ass antihumanism, which has often had the effect of simultaneously insulating them from conventional expectations of spatial legibility while also absolving them of the cardinal sins of spatial disorientation and spatial discrimination.

In retrospect, we know that the original planning of the IRLBPH took shape over the course of a decade (roughly 1968–78), more or less following the same historical contours



as then-current legislation for people with disabilities: from the passage of the Architectural Barriers Act (1968), which mandated access as a part of all post-1968 architectures supported by federal funding, to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, specifically its Section 504, which secured fundamental civil rights (and, importantly, antidiscrimination) protections for people with disabilities. Yet Tigerman's motivation was never solely to design a library as a programmatic response to the legal mandates or the winds of social change. Rather, he was motivated by the desire to put disabled subjectivity at the center, and not at the periphery, of architectural experience—a deliberate subversion of the heroic architect whose bold genius towers over the user. His choices never give way to the paternalistically remedial, rehabilitative, or “special” properties often associated with designing for disability or for its intended beneficiaries (Figure 12). Even those moments of Tigermanesque bravado, such as the suspended waveform window, serve as orientation devices for the benefit of library patrons and not simply as a feather for the architect's cap. The IRLBPH played up assumptions about spatial disorientation for people with disabilities precisely in order to promote forms of spatial orientation for people with disabilities. In this sense, the semiotic tropes Tigerman deployed spatially throughout the library harken back to the kinds of premodern forms that, like Louis Kahn's explorations of ancient monumentality, engage the user in both a physical *and* metaphysical experience of space that cannot be reduced to mere architectural functionalism.

It is for these reasons that Tigerman's approach to the IRLBPH stands in stark contrast to the approaches of contemporary figures like Rudolph Wines, and Charles W. Moore, architects for whom the production of disorientation, spatial or otherwise, was imagined as an exotic rejoinder to the controlling tendencies of modernism.<sup>35</sup> Like the infamous acting technique in which sighted actors are blindfolded for an hour to give them an “authentic” experience of being blind, the postmodern predilection for disorientation ultimately relies upon an able-bodied caricature of bodily difference and the potentially liberating qualities of dissonant embodiment. Even Venturi's famed Guild House in Philadelphia (1963), built as a quasi-self-conscious attempt to design for an elderly population, offers a presumptively able-bodied version of habitus masquerading as a site of community care. But whereas the aesthetic codes Tigerman deployed throughout the IRLBPH site are used to anchor the experiences of the user and give agency to their subjective experiences, however they are accessed, Venturi's Guild House invokes the aesthetic codes of a dignified classicism as superficial decorations that have the cumulative effect of mocking, not uplifting, the user. The building's

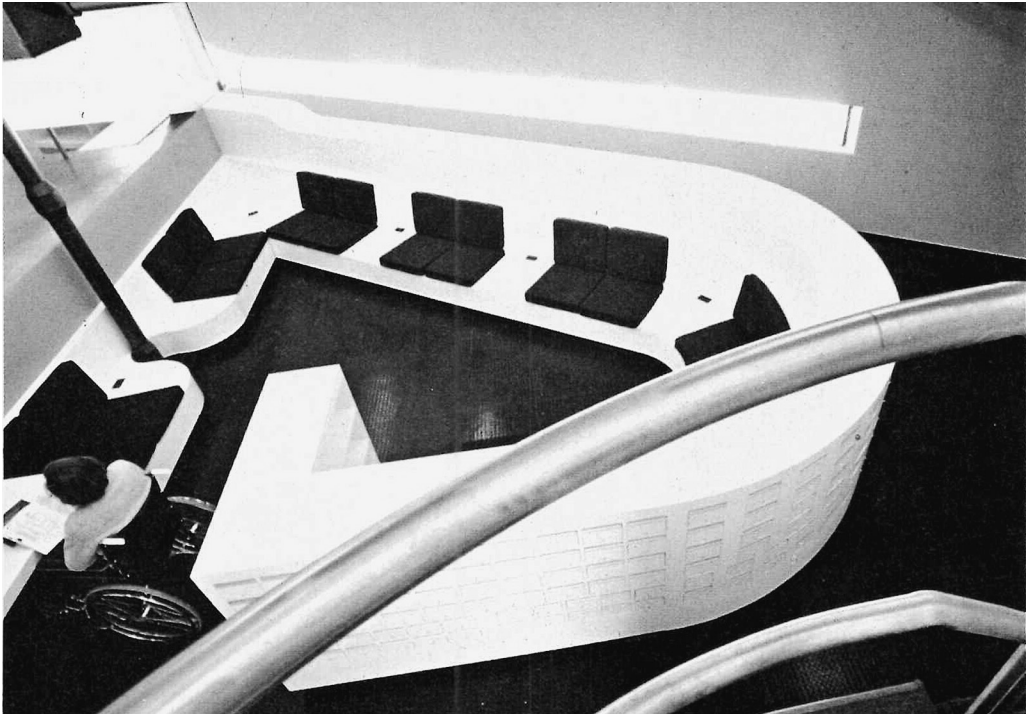


Figure 12. Overhead view of the curvilinear Braille card catalog surrounding a built-in reading area on first floor of the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physical Handicapped, ca. 1978. Photograph by Philip Turner and published in the April 1978 issue of *Progressive Architecture*.

features sit on the façade like a pair of Groucho Marx glasses shoved by a wanton schoolboy onto the face of a patient in intensive care. In Venturi and Tigerman, then, we can see two opposing legacies of modernism, as bequeathed by two of the late twentieth century’s most celebrated practitioners of postmodernism. For Venturi, architecture was a medium of semiotic play, but one through which the architect experimented with form to assert smug insider knowledge. For Tigerman, by contrast, architecture was also a medium of semiotic play, but one through which the architect experimented with form to assert that one’s right to access did not have to sacrifice one’s right to aesthetic pleasure. Indeed, it could capitalize on it.

In *Behind the Postmodern Façade* (1993), her study of leading US architects during the late 1980s, the sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson observed that for many architects of Tigerman’s generation “[t]he political activism of the 1960s merged with the architectural criticism of corporate modernism, going against both its style and its favored building types. The early phase of postmodernism harbored hopes of developing a different type of urbanism and significant public commissions. The hopes floundered in the recession of the 1970s and disappeared in the political reaction of the 1980s.”<sup>36</sup> For Tigerman, however, “hopes” for a different world was not a false consciousness to overcome. Rather, postmodernism provided a political and aesthetic platform through which to explore how designing *for* difference rather than *against* it might be one way of keeping modernism’s legacies perpetually refreshed. Yet

Pappageorge Haymes Partners were clearly guided by a ethos more interested in preserving the visual aesthetics of “post-modernism” than in preserving Tigerman’s original design for the IRLBPH. Even by failing to restore the IRLBPH’s original Crayola-bright primary colors to the building’s exterior and interior and instead choosing shades of Crate-and-Barrel white and Pottery Barn blue, the Lakeside Bank building fails to be “sensitive” to historical postmodernism and defaults instead to an insipid mediocrity that can be found at any upscale housewares store. Lakeside’s conversion thus preserves what is most superficially associated with postmodernism while erasing any evidence of the building’s material commitments to disability created in relation to postmodernism.

Renovation projects are ultimately impoverished when efforts to preserve a building’s branded eccentricities are made at the expense of other architectural histories and their formalistic or conceptual complexities. By purging the architect’s incorporation of disability from the site, Pappageorge Haymes Partners irrevocably altered the site’s relationship to the very history of postmodern architecture that it sought to valorize. We cannot undo such damage. We can only move forward. But like Venturi Scott Brown’s colonnade of oversized Corinthian columns sitting forlornly in a La Jolla garden, perhaps the bank that now occupies the former site of the IRLBPH can serve as a poignant reminder that preserving architectural history does not have to take only one direction.

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#### Biography

David Serlin is an associate professor of communication and science studies, and affiliated faculty in critical gender studies, urban studies, and the interdisciplinary group in cognitive science, at UC San Diego. His books include *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), *Keywords for Disability Studies* (co-editor; NYU Press, 2015), and *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming). He was awarded the 2020–2021 Rome Prize in Architecture from the American Academy in Rome.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ashley Mackin-Solomon, “La Jolla Historical Society to Create ‘Pocket Park’ Centered Around MCASD Pergola,” *La Jolla Light* (June 20, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Corey Levitan, “Architects Challenge Expansion of Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego’s La Jolla Campus,” *La Jolla Light* (August 12, 2018); Carolina A. Miranda, “Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego Expansion is a ‘Mistake,’ Critics Say in an Open Letter,” *Los Angeles Times* (August 14, 2018); and Marty Graham, “Robert Venturi’s Columns Tucked Behind La Jolla Bungalow: Museum of Contemporary Art Ready to Demolish Them,” *San Diego Reader* (August 28, 2018).

- <sup>3</sup> Aaron Betsky, “Just Let It Go,” *Architecture* (August 13, 2018), [https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/just-let-it-go\\_o](https://www.architectmagazine.com/design/just-let-it-go_o) (accessed July 7, 2019). See also Joseph Giovannini, “Should PoMo Architecture, at the 50-Year Mark, Be Saved?” *New York Times* (November 30, 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> Margaret McCormick, “The Ironic Loss of the Postmodern BEST Store Facades,” *Failed Architecture* (July 23, 2014), <https://failedarchitecture.com/the-ironic-loss-of-the-postmodern-best-store-facades/> (accessed July 6, 2019).
- <sup>5</sup> See Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 23–30. See also Reinhold Martin, *Utopia’s Ghost: Architecture and Postmodernism, Again* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2010).
- <sup>6</sup> Nathan Brown, “Postmodernity, Not Yet: Toward a New Periodisation,” *Radical Philosophy* 201 (February 2018): 11.
- <sup>7</sup> See Jos Boys, *Doing Disability Differently* (New York and London: Routledge, 2014) and *Disability, Space, and Architecture: A Reader*, ed. Jos Boys (New York and London: Routledge, 2017); Elizabeth Guffey, *Designing Disability: Symbols, Space, Society* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018); Aimi Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Rob Imrie, “Architectural Practices and Disabling Design in the Built Environment,” *Environment and Planning B* 26, no. 2 (June 1999): 409–25, and Rob Imrie and Eva Egermann, “Buildings That Fit Society: The Modernist Ideal and the Social Production of Ableist Spaces,” in *Transatlantic Modernisms*, ed. Model House Research Group (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2013), 208–17; Wanda Katja Liebermann, “The Right to Live in the World: Architecture, Inclusion, and the Americans with Disabilities Act,” in *Spatializing Politics: Essays on Power and Place*, ed. Delia Duong Ba Wendel and Fallon Samuels Aidoo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 273–300; Barbara Penner, “The Flexible Heart of the Home,” *Places Journal*, May 2018, <https://doi.org.10.22269/180529> (accessed April 26, 2020); and Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (New York: NYU Press, 2019). See also Christina Cogdell, *Eugenic Design: Streamlining America in the 1930s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jorge Oteros-Pailos, *Architecture’s Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), esp. 100–145.
- <sup>9</sup> For more about the effects of austerity measures on disability culture, especially those stemming from neoliberal policies, see Robert McRuer, *Crip Times: Disability, Globalization, and Resistance* (New York: NYU Press, 2018) and David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).
- <sup>10</sup> For more about the overlap between architectural and disability histories in France a century after the Hôtel national des Invalides, see Sun-Young Park, *Ideals of the Body: Architecture, Urbanism, and Hygiene in Postrevolutionary Paris* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2018); see also Park’s essay in this volume.
- <sup>11</sup> See Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Zurich: Lars Muller, 2019). See also Lesley Topp, “‘An Architecture for Modern Nerves’: Josef Hoffmann’s Purkersdorf Sanatorium,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56, no. 4 (December 1997): 414–37; and Annmarie Adams, *Medicine By Design: The Architect and the Modern Hospital, 1893–1943* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
- <sup>12</sup> The curb cut can be viewed as part of the Smithsonian’s online exhibition “Every Body: An Artifact History of Disability in America,” at <https://everybody.si.edu/> (accessed July 8, 2019).
- <sup>13</sup> For further discussion and contextualization of the Kenneth and Phyllis Laurent House and the Charles Boettcher School for Crippled Children within mid-twentieth-century architectures of disability, see David Serlin, *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Paul Goldberger’s glowing review, “Library for the Blind an Architectural Triumph,” *New York Times* (August 9, 1978).
- <sup>15</sup> “Eleven Works by Stanley Tigerman,” *A+U* 67 (July 1976): 72–120.
- <sup>16</sup> “Lakeside Bank,” Pappageorge Haymes Partners’ description of project, <http://www.pappageorgehaymes.com/projects/lakeside-bank> (accessed July 8, 2019).
- <sup>17</sup> Tigerman, quoted in Diana Bitting, “Giving Back,” *Modern Luxury*, October 4, 2013, <https://modernluxury.com/interiors-chicago/story/giving-back> (accessed July 6, 2019).
- <sup>18</sup> Tigerman, “Library for the Blind,” *Design Quarterly* 105 (1978): 24.
- <sup>19</sup> Barbara Penner, “From Ergonomics to Empathy: Herman Miller and MetaForm,” in *The Routledge Companion to Design Studies*, ed. Penny Sparke and Fiona Fisher (New York and London: Routledge, 2016), 279.
- <sup>20</sup> Although the two-car garage does not survive, a pristine maquette made by Tigerman ca. 1976 was donated by the architect to the collections of the Art Institute

of Chicago. See <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/214954/two-car-garage-regional-library-for-the-blind-chicago-illinois-model>.

<sup>21</sup> Goldberger, "Library for the Blind."

<sup>22</sup> For a good background on Netsch's approach to the University of Illinois at Chicago's "Circle Campus," see the online history exhibit at <https://uicarchives.library.uic.edu/circle-campus/> (accessed July 10, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Martin, *Utopia's Ghost*, esp. 29–48.

<sup>24</sup> Mara Mills, "The Co-Construction of Blindness and Reading," in *Disability Trouble*, ed. Ulrike Bergermann (Berlin: B Books, 2013), 195–204.

<sup>25</sup> Hamraie, *Building Access*, 107–12.

<sup>26</sup> Tigerman, "Library for the Blind," 31.

<sup>27</sup> See Sara Hendren's portfolio of design projects at <https://sarahendren.com/about/> and Graham Pullin, *Design Meets Disability* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Structure, Habitus, Practice," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78–86.

<sup>29</sup> Williamson, *Accessible America*, esp. 69–95.

<sup>30</sup> Hamraie, *Building Access*, 120–25.

<sup>31</sup> In 2016, the Dutch architect Jurgen Bey unveiled his design for a meeting space for the European Council in Brussels reminiscent of Tigerman's design for pre-school children consisting of "28 interlocking furniture pieces representing the EU's 28 member states, echoing the motto of the European Union united in diversity," <https://sandberg.nl/xml-and-jurgen-bey-design-new-interior-for-the-european-council-in-bruss>.

<sup>32</sup> Michael A. Jones and John Caitlin, "Design for Access," *Progressive Architecture* (April 1978): 70.

<sup>33</sup> Felicity Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics After Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 130.

<sup>34</sup> David Gissen, "Disability as Architectural Criticism," *HTC Experiments* (October 3, 2008), <https://htcexperiments.org/2008/10/03/disability-as-architectural-criticism-yale-1996/> (accessed July 10, 2019).

<sup>35</sup> For a particularly acrid interpretation of architectural modernism's propensities for control, see Sven-Olov Wallenstein, *Biopolitics and the Emergence of Modern Architecture* (New York: Temple Hoyne Buell Center for the Study of American Architecture/Princeton Architectural Press, 2010).

<sup>36</sup> Magali Sarfatti Larson, *Behind the Postmodern Façade: Architectural Change in Late Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 176.