

## ACCESSIBLE AMERICA

A History of Disability and Design

By Bess Williamson

304 pp. NYU Press. 2019.

Bess Williamson, a historian of design and material culture, covers a lot of ground in this lucid and nimble stomp through the history, politics, and culture of disability and design. It is a story of the shifting perspectives by and about those with disabilities and their evolving presence and participation in society. Her references are many and far-flung, from the standardized and thus, often ill-fitting prosthetic limbs of returning World War II disabled veterans, in chapter 1, to the wardrobe of bespoke prosthetic legs modeled by athlete and activist Aimee Mullins in Matthew Barney's *The Cremaster Cycle* (2003), in the final chapter. Williamson analyzes iterations of legislation (i.e., ANSI 117.1–1961, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990), and the foot-dragging on compliance and the backlashes that have fueled the conversation. In addition to deep research, voluminous footnotes, and a bibliography, Williamson uses fresh metrics, such as comparing the number of manuals on ergonomics in library collections. (Henry Dreyfuss's *The Measure of Man* of 1950 beats out Niels Diffrient's *Humanscale* of 1974.) Alas, this book's title is ironic or at least, aspirational. Williamson avers that "designing an accessible America—still a vision left unfulfilled—requires embedding design in systems that can support rights and equality in ways that go beyond the material." (214) She builds a ramp for readers to consider our responsibility towards usability and inclusion. —Lisa Thaler, author of *Look Up: The Life and Art of Sacha Kolin*, 9 May 2019