

Defining Terms

by Lucy Nguyen Pham



Anther Kiley
Mondays 9:00-12:00

GRAPH-321G-01
CIT 502

C O N T E X T



In Context

This publication was created in October 2023 for *Graduate Seminar I*, taught by Anther Kiley at the Rhode Island School of Design.

Project Description:

Critically engaged design practice is most productive when it exposes and questions its subject matter in ways that push beyond surface-level understandings to arrive at new interpretations and insights. The path to these kinds of insights is often ‘creative research’ — exploration and investigation that moves loosely and opportunistically across disciplines (as graphic design often does) and embraces the subjectivity of the designer. This assignment asks you to practice this kind of inquiry. You’ll identify a term that intrigues you, ‘unpack’ it through a series of five text and image ‘definitions,’ and present your definitions in a small physical or virtual publication. Your definitions will untangle, analyze, and expose your term from multiple angles, ranging from the specific to expansive, concrete to abstract, visual to theoretical. In addition to modeling strategies of creative inquiry, your definitions may also act as a catalyst for future research or support developing lines of inquiry.

Info

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Project 1: Defining Terms

Critically engaged design practice is most productive when it exposes and questions its subject matter in ways that push beyond surface-level understandings to arrive at new interpretations and insights. The path to these kinds of insights is often "creative research"—exploration and investigation that moves loosely and opportunistically across disciplines (see graphic design often does) and embraces the subjectivity of the designer. This assignment asks you to practice this kind of inquiry. You'll identify a term that intrigues you, "unpack" it through a series of five text and image "definitions," and present your definitions in a small physical or virtual publication. Your definitions will unangle, analyze, and expose your term from multiple angles, ranging from the specific to the expansive, concrete to abstract, visual to theoretical. In addition to modeling strategies of creative inquiry, your definitions may also act as a catalyst for future research or support developing lines of inquiry.

...

Start by picking a term—a noun, or good adjective—either from one of the readings or from elsewhere in design/cultural discourse—that you feel merits unpacking (perhaps it's politically charged, contested, multifaceted, overused, etc.). Here are some examples from the Susan Sontag essay (which you're welcome to use):

Public	Quotation	Trophy
State	Mechanical bands	Tourism
Collection	Caricature	Fony
Act	Fitness	Appropriation

Gather five images that illustrate five different aspects of your term's meaning. Find (or generate) an image for each of these categories:

1. An etymology
2. A specific, concrete example/instance
3. An historical event
4. A discipline/approach/school of thought
5. A visual phenomenon

For each image, write an extended caption (150–300 words) clearly describing the subject of the image(s) and exploring how it complicates, clarifies, nuances, or otherwise elaborates the meaning of your term. These entries are your five "definitions."

The five prompts above are intended to push each of your entries to explore distinctly



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Introduction

In September and October of 2023, I explored the term “accessibility” in order to *“push beyond surface-level understandings to arrive at new interpretations and insights” of the term* (as described on the course website).

My interest in the term “accessibility” is less about following WCAG and ADA guidelines (although important). It’s really about overcoming the digital, social, physical, and economic barriers related to digital, information, and education accessibility. Growing up with the Internet, I didn’t truly understand how the web—from its technical design to its contents—gatekeep people from knowledge, forms of profit, and forms of engagement and creativity found in online communities, digital tools, and especially research (or falling down Internet rabbit holes). Being able to seek out resources is a skill and privilege in of itself.

By redefining the term, I tried to explore different approaches or barriers to accessibility, from concrete examples to forms of gatekeeping. Personally, I was able to explore ideas of cultural and information accessibility through these different lenses.



Gatekeeping: An Etymology



[FIG 1]

Van Wickle
Gates to Brown
University.

The etymology of “accessible” is that it comes from the Latin word “accessibilis”¹ which is a verbal adjective of “accessus.”² “Accessus” could mean “entry” or admittance.”³ “Entry” usually refers to the act of entering a space or the entryway itself⁴ while “admittance” is having permission to enter⁵ something.

The image for this entry is ironic. It depicts the Van Wickle Gates to Brown University which is considered to be an elite and prestigious institution. Gated spaces have the connotation of elitism and exclusion, both in terms of acceptance rates and in economic or social status. Brown University has a physical entryway, but most applicants will not be admitted through these gates. After all, the verbiage of walking through or opening the Ivy League gates exists for a reason.

A book on Amazon.com titled *Open the Gates to the Ivy League: A Plan B for Getting into the Top Colleges* describes how Ivy League schools “reject some 90 percent of applicants.” The book claims to provide tips on overcoming these metaphorical barriers (and maybe physical too). The concepts of “open the gates” and admittance implies the opportunity of inclusion and the very ability to exclude. In short, one way to think about accessibility is how or who we include or exclude people in closed spaces.

Gate Gallery



[FIG 2] FitzRandolph Gate at Princeton University



[FIG 3] 116th Street Gate at Columbia University



[FIG 4] Johnston Gate at Princeton University



[FIG 5] Eddy Gate at Columbia University



ates on Broadway at
ersity



t Harvard University



rnell University



[FIG 6] Phelps Gate at Yale University



[FIG 7] Memorial Gates at the University of
Pennsylvania

Parking for the RISD Beach, also known as Tillinghast Place, is accessible via ID for current RISD faculty, staff, and students. However, the public can still walk onto the beach according to spokeswoman Danielle Stead Mancuso.





[FIG 8] The gates to Tillinghast Place, RISD's private beach.

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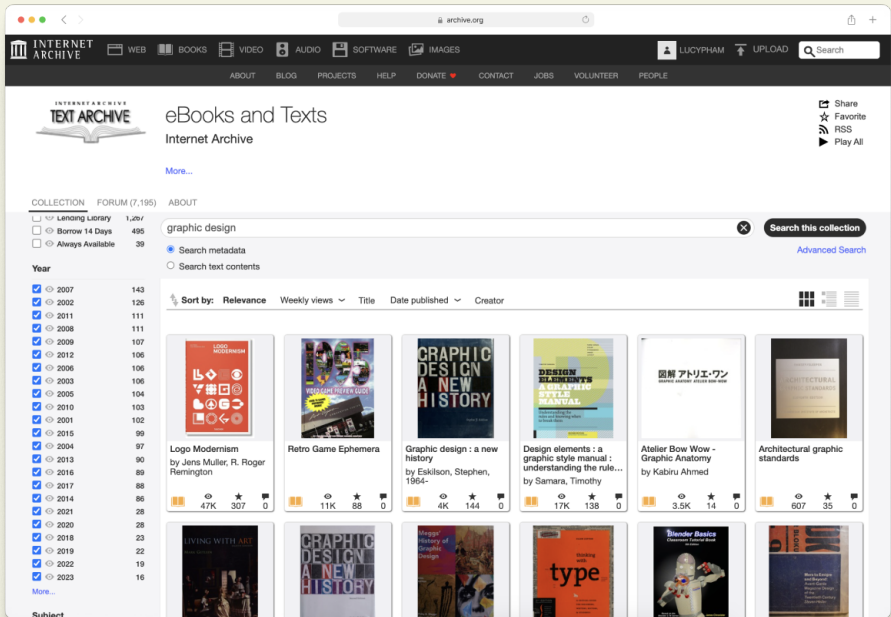
America Has a Private-Beach Problem

A shockingly small portion of the shoreline is truly available to the public.

By Michael Waters



Internet Archive: A Concrete Example



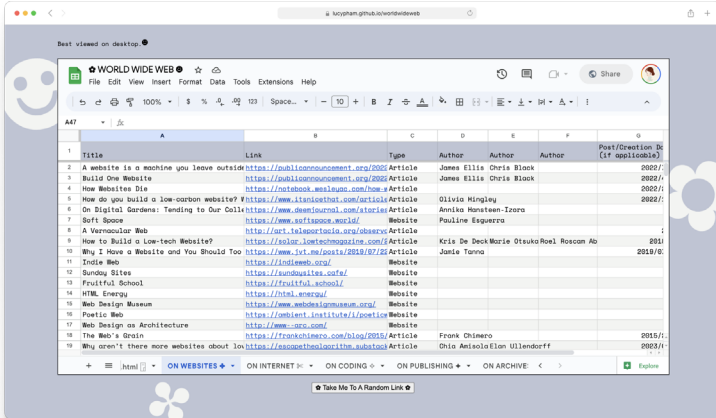
[FIG 9]

A search for graphic design books in the Internet Archive library.

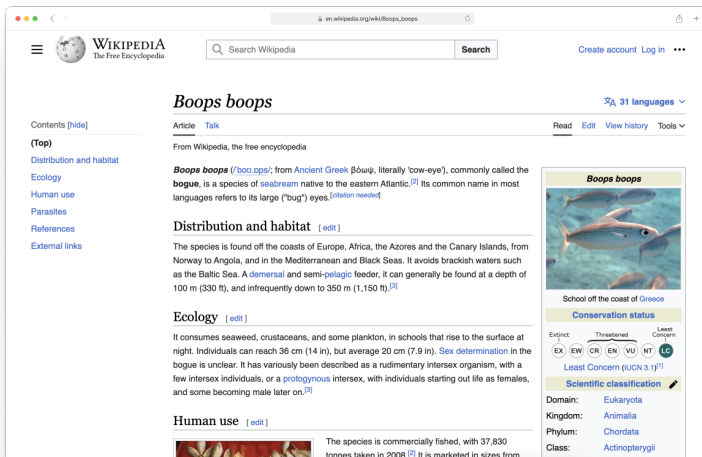
Accessibility also relates to information access, whether it means creating new ways or platforms to access information or by making it entirely free.

Internet Archive is a non-profit digital library of websites, books, movies and television, audio, images, and more. Their primary goal is to provide “universal access to knowledge.” *Internet Archive* can be accessed by anyone for free. Although they initially focused on saving web pages, they have expanded to provide for those that have difficulties reading printed text and/or may not be able to access certain materials through their local or academic library.⁶ In that sense, they aim to meet the needs of

those with various kinds of accessibility issues, including issues faced by those with physical impairments or those with less resources as a result of socioeconomic factors.



[FIG 10] Form your own personal and sharable library or list of resources using a spreadsheet.



[FIG 11] Wikipedia is a free encyclopedia which wouldn't exist without thousands of passionate volunteer contributors.

[FIG 12]

Brad Lomax (left)
next to Judy Heumann
at a 1977 rally in
Washington Square.



The 501 Sit-In: A Historical Event

Accessibility calls attention to the diversity and intersectionality of experiences, rendering them visible.

Sociologist Irving Zola argues that people with disabilities have no recorded history because they weren't given the tools to do so which isolates them from greater society. Additionally, early organizations

focused on specific *causes* of a disability and how to cure them. By not focusing on the *effect* of these disabilities shared by multiple people with different disabilities, this led to fragmentation of the overall disability rights movement. Public relations campaigns also focused on children, suggesting that disabilities are primarily associated with children. As a result, adults with disabilities were excluded from these campaigns.⁷

The disability rights movement became whole in the 1960s. The 504 Sit-in was a disability rights protest that began on April 5, 1977 and lasted for about 25 days in San Francisco, making it one of the most significant community efforts toward disability rights. The protests were a response to the U.S. government which failed to enforce Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.⁸ Among those who protested include Brad Lomax who, in addition to being a disability rights activist, was a member of the Black Panther Party.⁹ Kitty Cone, an LGBT+ disability rights activist, was one of the organizers of the sit-in. This event and the formation of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 were predecessors to the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. Both acts primarily focus on the effect of disabilities, rather than the causes, and it also shows how individuals with shared and varied intersectional identities could come together to enact change. The protest was also a kind of public relations campaign that brought diverse experiences to light.





Models of Disability: An Approach

Accessibility can refer to the acceptance of differences, as explained when comparing the medical versus the social model of disability.

In the *medical model of disability*, disabilities are impairments of the body—physical, mental, or sensory—and should be “fixed” or “cured” to “conform with normative values.”¹⁰

In contrast, the social model of disability states that people are disabled by social and systemic barriers, their environments, exclusion, etc. Impairments are a result of societal failures to accommodate various needs, not because of functional differences arising from physical, mental, intellectual, or other differences.¹¹ Instead of rejecting these differences by trying to “fix” them, the social model normalizes these differences by integrating them into the built and social environment. This model also relates to universal design, an approach that aims to make designed things accessible and useful to everyone to the greatest extent possible.¹² By designing for disabilities, one

[FIG 13]

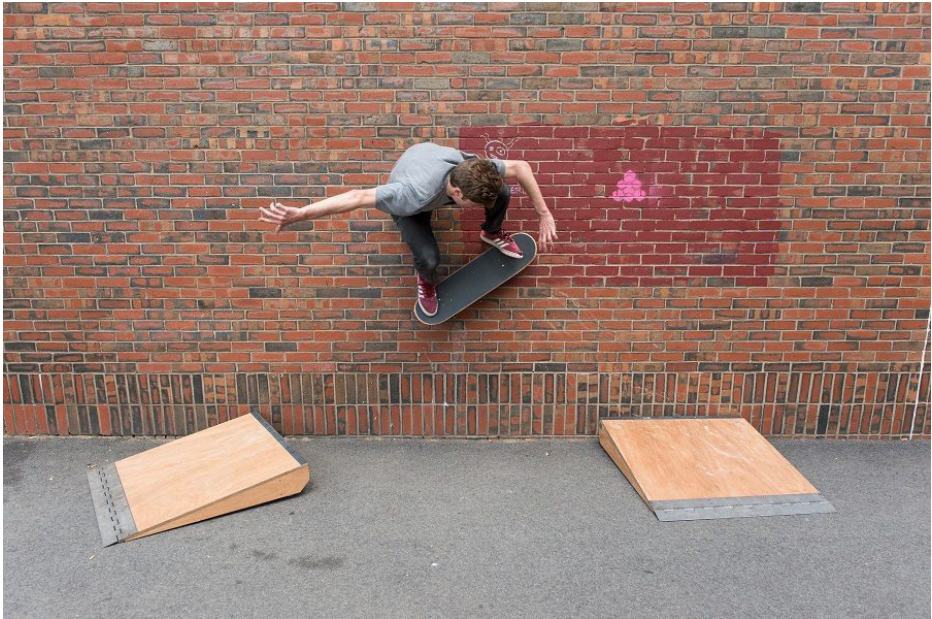
A wheelchair user uses the ramp to make a single step entrance more accessible.

ends up designing something that is beneficial for an even wider range of people than was intended for. Thus, the social model approach makes designing for accessibility more desirable and beneficial for everyone in the long term.

In fall 2013, Sara Hendren, who was interested in the inclined plane, designed modular ramps that could be used by skateboarders and wheelchair users alike.¹³ Later in 2015, Alice Sheppard collaborated with Hendren to explore ways in which Sheppard could use the ramps for choreography, as she herself uses a wheelchair to dance.¹⁴ The image below depicts Sheppard performing in front of the Seoul Museum of Art while on top of Hendren's ramps.

[FIG 14] Alice Sheppard performing on top of Sara Hendren's ramps in front of the Seoul Museum of Art.





[FIG 15] A skateboarder uses Sara Hendren's ramps to wallride.



Subtitled Film Stills: A Visual Phenomenon

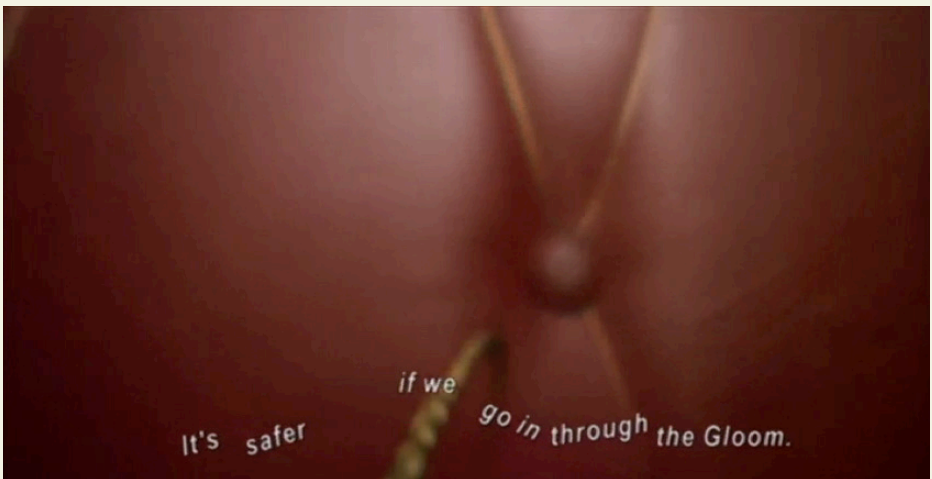
Accessible design often improves other people's lives, even when they aren't the intended or primary user.

Captions or subtitles allow those who are deaf or hard of hearing to understand fully what is being said (or what is happening in the background). Captions also support those who aren't native speakers of the spoken language, experience auditory processing disorders, struggle with verbal comprehension or concentration, and watching videos in a public space when playing the audio out loud isn't possible. About 13% of the population has hearing loss in both ears which makes it surprising to know that in recent surveys, over 50% of respondents said that they turn on subtitles (and that percentage increases with Gen Z's).¹⁵ Many users use subtitles, even though it isn't medically necessary.

Sean Zdenek is an associate professor at the University of Delaware who researches web accessibility, disability studies, sound studies, etc.¹⁶ In a blog post titled "Subtitles as visual art," he examines how subtitles are incorporated into the film *Night Watch* (2004) with a variety of animated examples available.¹⁷ Instead of just doing the bare minimum by adding simple subtitles, the designers attempted to enhance the experience of those who use them and by creating a new experience for those who don't typically use them. Accessibility isn't an afterthought, and playful accessible design was incorporated into the film with planning and effort.



[FIG 16] Still (with subtitles of varying sizes and locations) from *Night Watch* (2004) directed by Timur Bekmambetov.



[FIG 17] Still (with subtitles on a wavering line) from *Night Watch* (2004) directed by Timur Bekmambetov.

[1]



You told me to scrub all the floors in the house with a Barbie toothbrush.

[2]

肉まんよりも君が



I LIKE YOU MORE THAN A

[4]



Dearly beloved, we're gathered here today cause a backstabbing little bitch got exactly what was coming to her

[6]



It's so boring in this country. Nobody wants to dance.

[5]



I love rain. It's good for the hair.

[9]



[PEANUTS GROWLING]

[8]



Basically, I have no interests and I have no talent.

す
が
好き!

A MEAT BUN

[3]



I am so used to being
the bad boy.

[7]



"Thai food, feminist prose
and angry girl music

- [1] Still from Ryan Murphy, *Scream Queens* (Pilot Episode, 2015)
- [2] Still from Hatsuki Tsuji, *Hime-chan's Ribbon* (Episode 10, 1992)
- [3] Still from Ken Kwapis, *The Office* (Season 2, Episode 2, 2005)
- [4] Still from Barbara Brown, *Scream Queens* (Season 1, Episode 7, 2015)
- [5] Still from Éric Rohmer, *Four Adventures of Reinette and Mirabelle* (1989)
- [6] Still from Shūji Terayama, *Throw Away Your Books, Rally in the Streets* (1971)
- [7] Still from Gil Junger, *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999)
- [8] Still from *If You Are the One* (game show)
- [9] Still from Andy DeEmmony and Declan Lowney, *Father Ted* (Season 2 Episode 11, 1996)

Endnotes

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Images

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- [FIG 13] "Ramp, Davis Wheelchair Ascending." *Harvard Graduate School*, gsd.harvard.edu/project/slope-intercept. Accessed 15 October 2023.
- [FIG 14] "Alice Sheppard performing on top of Sara Hendren's ramps in front of the Seoul Museum of Art." *Adit Dhanushkodi*, adit.design/portfolio/slope-intercept-exhibit. Accessed 1 October 2023.
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