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Research paper

## Individual stakes and collective ideology in tension: Looking at physical and spatial obstacles from an experiential perspective<sup>☆</sup>



*Entre enjeux individuels et idéologie : analyser les obstacles physiques et spatiaux selon une perspective expérientielle*

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### ABSTRACT

This paper presents a critical hermeneutic interpretation of the meanings, practices and values associated with physical and spatial obstacles present in the shopping experiences of individuals with mobility or visual impairments. The social model of disability, which positions disablement in societal attitudes, understandings, practices, and institutions, has reinforced a view that built environments tend to limit, restrict, segregate, and even oppress differently-abled individuals. Despite the pervasiveness of this view, little research has empirically explored the experiences of,

<sup>☆</sup> The study presented in this article—like the others in this special issue *Le centre commercial : un laboratoire vivant/Mall as Living Lab*—is part of the larger “CRIR-Living Lab Vivant” project described in the introduction to the issue: Desjardins, M., Ville, I., & Mazurik, K. (2014) On theoretical and methodological constructing of obstacles to social participation: The CRIR-Living Lab Vivant project. *Alter, European Journal of Disability Research*, 8 (3).

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responses to, or evaluations of environmental barriers. In the current study, we interviewed and observed four individuals with visual impairments and four individuals with mobility impairments in hopes of better understanding these topics within a shopping context. Reconstructing participants' discourses into their implicit narrative structures, we found that participants generally re-established equilibrium in their emplotted encounters with obstacles in the mall, transfiguring challenging and dysfunctional environments into coherent and functional spaces. Our findings challenge the notion that the constructions, meanings, and values of physical and spatial obstacles are universal or intrinsic, and point to the agency of participants in shaping their own plots. We suggest that future research ought to examine physical and spatial obstacles within even broader frameworks of meaning.

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## R É S U M É

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Cet article propose une interprétation herméneutique critique des significations, des pratiques et des valeurs que les personnes qui présentent des incapacités motrices ou visuelles associent aux obstacles physiques et spatiaux qui limitent leur participation sociale. Le modèle social du handicap postule que les environnements construits restreignent, ségrèguent et oppriment les personnes qui présentent des incapacités. Malgré la popularité de ce postulat, peu de recherches empiriques ont examiné les expériences, les réactions et les évaluations que les personnes font des barrières environnementales. Dans le cadre de cette recherche, nous avons interviewé et observé huit individus qui présentent une incapacité visuelle ou motrice afin de comprendre leurs expériences de l'environnement. L'analyse de leurs discours révèle que ces personnes transforment l'environnement a priori hostile ou opprimant du centre commercial en un lieu fonctionnel et adapté à leurs besoins. Ces résultats contredisent l'idée selon laquelle la signification et la valeur des obstacles physiques et spatiaux sont intrinsèques et témoignent de la capacité des participants à se doter d'un monde à leur mesure. Nous concluons que la prise en compte de l'expérience des obstacles environnementaux ne peut cependant se limiter à ce niveau d'analyse et que les récits des participants doivent être situés également dans le monde vécu global de ces personnes.

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Obstacles in the built environment are often viewed as reinforcing the social exclusion of individuals with disability. To understand this issue from an experiential perspective, we conducted a pilot project examining the ways in which people with visual or mobility impairments engaged in a Montreal mall (Alexis Nihon). This article focuses on participants' experiences and understandings of physical and spatial obstacles within the mall.

The first section of the article presents a critical review of the literature on obstacles to social participation. The following section expresses our theoretical framework, notably based on Kleinman's conceptualization of moral experience, and Todorov's theory of narrative structure. The third section describes five categories of physical and spatial obstacles through three steps: participants'

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