

Accessible Housing, Curb Ramps, Assistive Technology

Cowan: Well, did you get a job then or were you just hanging out?

Dibner: I think I worked for several months at PDSP to make some money.

Cowan: Right then, just after Scott died?

Dibner: It was the fall of 1970, so it wasn't right after Scott died.
I don't know what I did for that summer, to tell you the truth.
I probably went back East and visited with my parents for a

while and came back. I did go back and forth to Maine to visit every once in a while.

So sometime in the fall of 1970 I worked for several months at the Disabled Students' Program. Zona asked me--I did know her at this point. She called up and said, "Would you like to be a housing counselor?" So I went to the Disabled Students' Program and was a housing counselor that fall.

Cowan: They hired you as a housing counselor?

Dibner: Correct.

Cowan: I read that there was a housing survey for trying to find accessible apartments for disabled people as they were moving out. Do you recall doing one?

Dibner: I recall that there was one. I don't remember if I did it. I may have. If I was at the Disabled Students' Program it would be logical, but it probably consisted of just walking around and looking at the big apartment buildings that might be useful to live in. There was a card file of housing, I seem to remember.

Cowan: That was for accessible buildings?

Dibner: Yes, but I don't remember much of the survey. Maybe someone did a survey. I think maybe Ruth did some of this, Ruth Grimes.

Cowan: What would make a building accessible? If you had done something like that, would it just be looking if they could get in the door? Was there some requirement for the room size, or the bathrooms, or anything like that?

Dibner: There certainly weren't any standards at that time. In '70 there were some guidelines out there but they weren't particularly designed for housing and I certainly wasn't familiar with them. What you would ask for in terms of accessibility would be a lot different from what you'd ask for today, but you'd need to be able to get to each floor, or the floors you need to get to, to the front door of your unit and get through the door. That would be a great advantage right there.

And the same is true today. If you can't get in the front door, it doesn't work. When I looked for this house, for instance, when Om Devi and I moved here a couple of years ago,

we had to find a place that was close enough to the ground it could be ramped.

Hessler lived on a place on Haste Street right around the corner from where I work now which was a cottage behind a large older apartment building. It had one step at the door and one step at the porch and so I built a little wooden ramp for him to get up to the porch and then to get up into the apartment. I guess maybe we had done that in France, I'm trying to remember. I think maybe we had to build a little ramp in France, so that was one of my first experiences with ramps, right, and learning that if you're closer to the ground, you don't have to build so much of a ramp, like, duh! [laughs]

Cowan: I certainly have heard your name associated with ramps over and over again, Eric. There is this story that you were building curb cuts and ramps in Berkeley sort of unofficially. Is there a story behind that?

Dibner: Well, you didn't hear about the nitroglycerin where we were blowing up curbs and [laughter] and jackhammers in the middle of the night, where we'd go and we'd jackhammer up all these intersections and then the city would have to fix them.

Cowan: No, I didn't hear that story. Is that a true story? [laughs]

Dibner: No, neither of those are true stories, actually. [laughs] That was a little later when Ed asked for some ramps to be-- there were some corners where he had problems going from his house to CIL, or maybe it was the Disabled Students' Program. So I got a bag of cement and went out. They were real low curbs, like a couple of inches, at Dana and Dwight, probably at Ellsworth and Dwight, and I think I did one at Ellsworth and Blake. It was just to bevel the corner. I mean, we didn't build curb ramps, we just put some cement down to make it useable.

O. Dibner: They were the first ramps.

Dibner: There were curb ramps in other places at that time.

O. Dibner: Oh, were there?

Dibner: Yes.

Cowan: I did read that the city rebuilt--this was in Hale's [Zukas] interview--that the city rebuilt Telegraph Avenue and did ramps.

Dibner: Yes. I don't remember how--I think they just decided to do it. Hale and I have discussed this in the last couple years because now that I work on curb ramps in Berkeley, I'm interested in when they started. There was a plaque put in last year about the first curb ramp, which wasn't down on Shattuck where the plaque was put, but was up on Telegraph. I think the city in '68-'69 had this project to rebuild the sidewalks on Telegraph. They put in all that pebbly aggregate sidewalk stuff and somehow decided to put ramps in. And Hale might have been involved in helping them to figure out where to locate them.

O. Dibner: They must have been encouraged by the people to do it. People raising their consciousness about it. The city of Berkeley doesn't just do stuff like that. Or didn't.

Dibner: That project happened while John and I were in France. When we came back, Telegraph was all accessible. I think that that--whether it was an accident or as Om Devi says there was some activism around it--the fact that Telegraph became accessible was a very important key foot in the door, so to speak, because it gave an avenue you could travel, you could move about, you could go to the cafe, you could go to the bookstore, you could go to school, you could go to the whole residential neighborhood south of Dwight Way [without needing assistance at each curb].

A lot of Berkeley has flat corners, not on the bigger streets as much as in the residential neighborhoods. Lots of south campus area has intersections where the street comes up to the actual curb. And as I said, some of them don't quite meet and that's why Ed needed one or two inches fixed.

This was a design that happened earlier in the century and it wasn't for access as much as it was for pedestrians to not have to step down at the corner. The water goes underneath the corner in a cross culvert, and that allows the intersection to stay kind of flat. I think that feature also was something of a catalyst in making it possible to live in this area.

In the seventies, also, there were a lot of ticky-tacky apartment buildings built with elevators. And even though the elevators might be kind of tiny and there's other problems with the buildings, they're flat. Some of them have steps and some of them don't have steps, but generally you roll in and you can get in to the elevator. It was a massive availability of housing. The bathrooms might not be accessible but at that time people I worked with were using commodes, just not going into the bathroom.

Cowan: Do you recall, in terms of living independently, any kinds of gadgets or things people put together to make it easier?

Dibner: Yes, these were memorialized in a booklet that Susan [O'Hara] provoked be put together which showed a bunch of assistive technology--primitive assistive technology, or what we would call low-tech, these days--in use. Mary Ann Hiserman and John Hessler are in that booklet. There's a product called pip which is a rubber lever handle on a door, so that's one kind of thing. Another is one is a string on the doorknob so you can pull the door closed behind you without backing your wheelchair against it. Other things are extension handles on keys and extensions on the turn latch on a lock--you can just tape a stick on it.

Let's see--Scott had a long reacher stick. He had a dowel, Scott used a dowel to reach things. I think he also had one of those reachers that you squeeze and it grips. So some of these things were available in the medical industry already. But some of them were just adaptations that people made.

The concept in adaptive devices and the assistive technology really is reach and ramp to me. A ramp is a bevel between two elevations. You're trying to get from point A to point B. And reach is bringing the object closer to you by extending it or changing its shape somehow so it's more manipulable. These are principals that carry through in the accessibility standards today.

In order to reach something you need location--you might have to move it closer--and ease of operation--it has to turn easily. So you extend it to make it a lever, which gives you greater force and also brings it down closer to you.

To me, the ramp is really symbolic, in a way, of how I see proceeding through the system. You're trying to get from point A to point B and you need to figure out how to lever your way--a ramp is a lever--and you need to figure out how to move objects that are blocking your path. So I use that analogy a lot in looking at how we're trying to do things. People aren't really trying to make a different world; they're just trying to build ramps.