

Book Review: Disabled People and Housing: Choices, Opportunities and Barriers, by Laura Hemingway

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Drawing on interviews with disabled people's organisations and disabled individuals, Laura Hemingway consider the barriers that many come up against when navigating the housing and employment markets. Andreea Moise praises the book for its action-oriented approach.

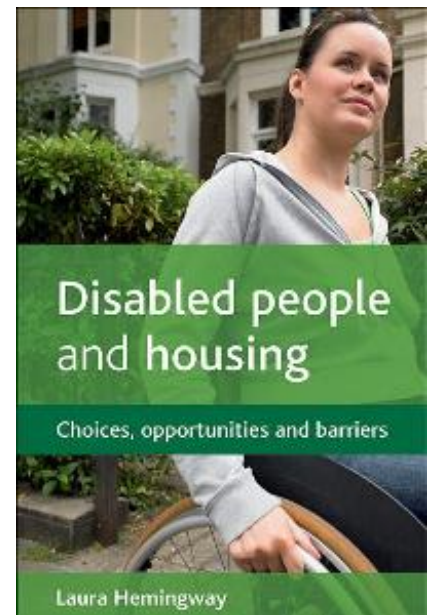


Disabled People and Housing: Choices, Opportunities and Barriers. Laura Hemingway. Policy Press. 224 pages. July 2011.

Find this book:

Despite the recognised importance of housing for disabled people in the past decade, many disabled people continue to live in unsuitable, inaccessible or undesirable accommodation that can compromise their everyday lives. Moreover, in the current period of major public cuts we are likely to see a decline in the provision of services for disabled people. An assessment made by the [Department of Work and Pensions](#) estimated that the housing benefit changes planned for April 2013 may affect the lives, security and future of about 450,000 disabled people.

In response to what she sees as the current failure by the government to fully meet disabled people's needs, Laura Hemingway promotes a holistic perspective in examining housing issues, policies and practices. Her book draws on interviews with disabled people's organisations and twenty individuals living in various forms of housing tenure, and is complemented by housing industry insights, to discuss the choices, opportunities and barriers that disabled people regularly come across. Hemingway is a Lecturer in Sociology and Social Policy at the [University of Leeds](#) with extensive experience in teaching and research in the areas of housing and disability.







The book begins by reviewing some of the main developments in housing policy and regulation, highlighting important markers in housing policy history for disabled people. It focuses on more generic anti-discrimination legislation such as [The Disability and Discrimination Act of 1995](#), National Strategies such as [ODI's independent living strategy](#), and also specific Acts that have given local authorities greater responsibilities to tackle disabled people's housing needs and to improve their access. Particularly impressive is that Hemingway identifies successful approaches to housing in countries outside the UK, suggesting that there may be a lot to learn from countries where institutional provision has been diminishing. Looking to Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Australia, Hemingway details legislation regulating internal design requirements and requiring all building adaptations to consider a collective approach to inclusion.

Hemingway moves on to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of individual and social models of disability that have been influential in shaping policy developments and housing provisions. The individual or medical approach to disability has largely influenced housing policy and practice since 19th century. It regards impairments as a "personal tragedy" for the individual rather than looking at

the “disabling” role of the environments, attitudes and institutional practices.

In contrast, the social model regards disability as socially constructed and solutions are sought to target social and environmental barriers. Nevertheless, even if it highlights the holistic nature of disability experiences, the social model is unsuccessful in addressing the experience of impairment or other social divisions (such as age, ethnicity, gender and sexuality). However, in spite of its apparent weaknesses, the social model arguably remains a valuable tool for action within policy when complemented by research into external reactions to a person’s impairment rather than those associated with the impairment itself.

In relation to these, the author discusses the importance of values, assumptions and knowledge of professionals such as planning regulators, property developers or estate agents about disabled people in the availability of accessible housing. Research into the perceptions held by house builders has shown that understandings of barrier-free housing can be limited and that disabled people’s housing needs are rarely understood and considered and in many cases can lead to discriminatory practices. The design of buildings, public amenities and streets, inaccessible transport systems and some aspects of housing design neglect to cater for diversity, creating an environment that force disabled people to depend on others to carry out everyday activities, which can have a negative impact on household relationships and sense of “home”.

The main points Hemingway discusses are related to the financial risk-assessment, access to information, design and location. One of the emblematic implications of the financial risk-assessment is that full-time permanent employment is generally considered the only legitimate source of “social citizenship and inclusion”, a requirement that discriminates against those who are unable to work and rely on state benefits, and against those who are not 100% fit for work might not have been able to remain in employment six months prior their mortgage application.

What adds great value to the book is its action-oriented approach. Hemingway focuses on a number of realistic solutions and good practice examples employing a social understanding of disability. In a persuasive and emphatic style, *Disabled People and Housing* clearly shows how dysfunctional policies and practices can be improved by focusing more on the importance of structural factors, institutional discrimination, and the existing barriers that disabled people face in accessing services. It is extremely important that policymakers and researchers acknowledge the importance of involving disabled people in decision-making and develop strategies for tackling barriers.

It should be noted that, because the interviews were conducted in 2006, some may claim that the evidence is out of date. However, it appears that the UK has not made significant progress since then in terms of housing access and because the economic crisis disabled people may experience even more difficulties in their everyday lives.

Ultimately, the book advocates that international debate and sharing expertise are highly needed to facilitate best practice in the area of housing for disabled people. It is an essential read for housing practitioners and policy makers aiming to engage in initiatives for more inclusive practices.

Andreea Moise has recently completed a master’s degree in social research methods and social policy at the London School of Economics. She is currently working as a policy research intern at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She has also collaborated on the Impact of Social Sciences Project.

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3. The government's Work Capability Assessment for disabled people is one of the toughest in the world – it is not fit for purpose
4. When planning for new housing developments, we must make sure they are built where people actually want to live.