

Taking Up Space

trevor wheeler

New York's transit system is its lifeblood. Millions of residents use it for work, school, shopping, eating, social functions, and countless other reasons. But disabled people, who, according to the 2018 AccessibleNYC Report, make up about 11.2% of the city's population, are often abandoned by the MTA, left with inadequate services and inaccessible transit options, and limited in a way that able-bodied people have the privilege of ignoring. I recently had the opportunity to speak with Cade Smith, a queer, disabled Art Education major and self-described "punk-ass 21-year-old," about their experiences navigating the city's transit system, their activism, and the concept of "public space."

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 established disabled persons as a protected class, and was further amended in 2008 to broaden the scope of what constituted "disability" to become relatively inclusive. The act finds that "physical or mental disabilities in no way diminish a person's right to fully participate in all aspects of society." In an attempt to combat historical oppression, it provides accessibility requirements for public spaces -- according to Cade, it's "the bare fucking minimum" (one only has to look at our lovely Pratt campus to see this).

Over the course of our conversation, I identified a common theme of "taking up space," and the social pressures enacted upon a disabled body when it attempts to exist in the "space" it needs. Cade uses a walker or cane to get around; they prefer the walker, but, on the subway, that's often more trouble than it's worth. "Sometimes it's better to feel physically worse," they say, than to disrupt too much space with their walker. They just put their headphones in, close their eyes, and try to ignore the subway train full of people glaring at them.

"As a disabled person," Cade continues, "you essentially have to demean yourself to get where you're going." They're more likely to get a seat on the bus than on the subway, and usually they have to ask for either. With only their cane, sometimes people don't even believe Cade deserves to sit. "I have to weigh the fact that I present as a young white man with the fact that I'm disabled and fat," they add, further complicating matters. Who gets to take up space?

Things aren't always so bleak. Currently, approximately 25% of stations have elevators, but Cade is participating in a new MTA initiative called Fast Forward, and has attended public hearings on the topic. At one such hearing, led by Alex Elegudin, the MTA's Senior Advisor for Systemwide Accessibility, the participants discussed a plan to provide elevators for at least 50 more stations within five years. The goal is for no one to be more than two stops from an

accessible station. What impressed Cade most was the way disabled members of the public took up space at the meeting -- Elegudin himself is a wheelchair user, and ASL interpreters and real-time transcription were provided, for example.

The meeting focused on identifying stations most in need of accessibility. Targets included stations close to public resources, like hospitals and cultural institutions, and areas with a higher population of disabled people. "If we must choose," Cade says, "we have to be pragmatic about it." While this program is exciting, and more than the MTA has ever done before, it was determined that residents could still end up almost 40 blocks away from the nearest accessible station, which might require disabled people to purchase another bus ticket or set them at risk of fatigue.

We must focus on continuing to advocate for an accessible public transit system. Attending and testifying at MTA open meetings, participating in protests and public demonstrations, and using your privilege to support those in need can all help to increase awareness of this issue, and increase social pressure to radically change our environment. We need a city where "public" space actually serves the needs of the public. When one portion of the population is oppressed, the entire population suffers the consequences.