



STADPLURAAL 2026



STADPLURAAL 2026

STADPLURAAL is Recyclart's format for multidisciplinary exchanges on the right to the city and collective practices in urbanism, architecture, and spatial design. This edition of STADPLURAAL examines **Barriers and Norms**, exploring what it means to **crip*** the city and imagine non-ableist urban spaces.

***Crip** is a term reclaimed from the word "cripple" within disability justice movements. As a verb, to crip means to challenge ableist norms, question taken-for-granted assumptions about bodies and environments, and reimagine systems, spaces and practices from the standpoint of disability and difference.

The 2026 cycle is programmed by Nora Unger with Shama Nair.



STADPLURAAL 2026

Report I: Designing Accessible Futures <i>Architecture & Disability Justice</i>	p. 4
Crip: Reading List	p. 15
Report II: Accessible Nightlife <i>Rethinking Club Design</i>	p. 17
Report III: Who Gets in? <i>Accessibility Across New & Historic Architecture</i>	p. 31
Contributors + Links	p. 45

STADPLURAAL 2026

Accessible Futures **Architecture and Disability Justice**

Crippling the Space
DisOrdinaryArchitecture
The Wheelies Project
& Meike de Roest

21.01.2026

Introduction and Framework

The Non-Ableist City

The 2026 edition of the **STADPLURAAL** talks opened with questions of access, disability justice, and the right to the city.

As a format for multidisciplinary exchange on collective practices in urbanism, architecture, and spatial design, STADPLURAAL 2026 examines barriers and norms in the built environment, exploring how cities can be critically rethought and redesigned **beyond ableist assumptions**.

The key question guiding the session was: **what would it mean to design, govern, and imagine a non-ableist city?** Moving beyond abstract theory or policy frameworks, the session foregrounded lived experience as a primary form of knowledge, situating disability not as an exception to urban life but as a central lens through which urban space must be understood.

Speakers + Contributions

Poppy Levison (DisOrdinary Architecture Project; she/her) is part of a UK-based platform rooted in the experiences and creativity of Disabled artists. DisOrdinary Architecture aims to shift dominant paradigms around Disability, access, and inclusion within architecture and the built environment.

Fien Criel (Crippling the Space; she/her) writes, researches and organises where Disability, art, climate and politics overlap. Confronted with institutional ableism and inaccessible academic structures, she critically analyzed university inclusion policies from her own lived experience as an ambulatory wheelchair user.

Henri Bistuer (he/him), **Alexandre Lemaire** (he/him), and **Josse Cornette** (they/them) (all The Wheelies Project) work collectively to improve accessibility and promote inclusion in Belgium by centering people with Disabilities and chronic illnesses in urban analysis and action.

Meike de Roest (she/her), also part of The Wheelies Project, moderated the discussion. She creates theatre and podcasts about (chronic) illness, works for RABKO, and has a background in spoken word and journalism.



Portraits courtesy of the speakers.

Public Toilets, Guerrilla Navigation, & Survival Strategies

Henri (Wheelies) emphasized the crucial role of public toilets in any serious attempt at inclusion. Without accessible public toilets, entire groups—wheelchair users, women, homeless people, LGBTQI+ people—are effectively excluded from public life. **Inclusion, he argued, cannot be symbolic; it must address bodily realities.**

From there, the conversation opened into a reflection on what Josse described as **“guerrilla-style navigation” of the city: the improvised, strategic, exhausting ways Disabled people are forced to move through spaces never designed for them.** Laughter erupted on stage as speakers joked about the logistics of peeing in public, but this humor was explicitly framed as a coping mechanism. As Josse noted, “we laugh because otherwise we’d be crying.” Humor, joy, and irony were presented not as distractions from activism, but as essential tools of survival and resistance.

“We laugh because otherwise we’d be crying.”

–Josse

Offering a meta-commentary on activism itself, the panel’s dynamic demonstrated that the medium was the message: **Disabled people are already producing knowledge, culture, and political insight, even when the city tries to confine them indoors.**

Visibility, Invisibility, & the Emotional Cost of the City

Moderator Meike redirected the discussion toward a deeper question:

How does it actually feel to navigate the city like this? Beyond logistics, what are the emotional and psychological consequences?

Henri (Wheelies), who moved to Brussels 11 years ago to study architecture, described a relationship marked by love and frustration. Despite the city's severe accessibility failures—cobblestones, broken lifts, inaccessible public transport—he remains deeply attached to Brussels.

Yet he stressed that **inaccessibility produces invisibility**: people assume disability is not a problem simply because Disabled people are rarely seen. In reality, they are absent because the city pushes them out. He described the constant need to prepare for conflict: defending the right to enter a building, managing frustration when lifts do not work, and conserving emotional energy just to be able to enjoy a social event afterward. Access barriers do not end at the threshold of a party; they begin long before, shaping expectations, mood, and exhaustion.

Poppy expanded this analysis by linking the built environment to social perception and violence. When Disabled people are only visible while struggling—unable to board a train independently or forced to ask for help—they are framed as incompetent or vulnerable. This narrative fuels patronizing behavior, but also increases exposure to gender-based and sexual violence.

Disability itself is not what creates vulnerability; inaccessible environments do.

Different Cities, Different Bodies

Fien, an ambulatory wheelchair user, highlighted how context radically shapes Disabled experience. In Brussels, she avoids using her wheelchair because the city makes it so difficult. In cities like Berlin or London, she uses it constantly and feels comfortable being seen as a wheelchair user.

The difference lies not only in infrastructure, but in social interaction: how people offer help, how public space anticipates bodies, and how normal disability feels. This led to a key insight repeated throughout the evening: **Disabled people already use cities in alternative ways, relying on informal networks, shared knowledge, and what was described as *crip** knowledge.** These systems exist, but they remain invisible to non-Disabled people, especially architects and planners. Bridging professional knowledge and lived knowledge, the speakers argued, is essential to creating genuinely accessible cities.



Photograph by The Wheelies Project

Disabled People as Experts, Not Afterthoughts

A recurring theme was the insistence that **Disabled people must be recognized as experts in their own access needs**. Poppy criticized the common practice of organizations and institutions speaking about Disabled people rather than with them, often treating lived experience as free labor or consultation to be extracted late in the process.

She described her own experience navigating Brussels as a blind person: uneven pavements, missing curb cuts, and uncontrolled crossings that force pedestrians to “walk into the road and hope no one hits you.” These dangers are not inevitable, she argued, nor are they justified by heritage or conservation.

Historic cities can be accessible; the real question is whose comfort and mobility are prioritized. Stairs, she provocatively suggested, should be understood as symbols of oppression, not neutral architectural elements.

Just as explicit exclusionary signs would be unacceptable today, the continued normalization of inaccessible design reveals how deeply ableism is embedded in architectural culture.

Accessibility Benefits Everyone – and Responsibility Is Shared

Alex reinforced the idea that accessible cities benefit everyone: older people, parents with strollers, injured bodies, and eventually almost all of us. **Disability, as the well-known saying goes, is the only minority you are likely to join.** Framing accessibility as a “special need” rather than a collective good obscures this reality.

Responsibility remains contested. Speakers debated whether accessibility failures stem from architects, city governments, regional authorities, or federal structures. **Josse pointed to Belgium’s tendency to diffuse responsibility across bureaucratic levels until accountability disappears entirely – a process they described as hostile and gaslighting.**

Several speakers argued that **inaccessibility should be fined, not merely discouraged.** In 2026, they insisted, designing inaccessible buildings should no longer be tolerated as ignorance or oversight.

Lessons from the UK

Regulation, Activism, and Radical Action

In response to audience questions, Poppy reflected on why cities like London appear more accessible. She rejected cultural explanations and instead emphasized strong building regulations, developed early (in the 1980s) by a Disabled architect, and sustained by decades of radical activism. Wheelchair users chained themselves to buses; they blocked streets; they forced change. As a result, accessible buses and wheelchair priority spaces are now legally protected.

She also highlighted structural innovations such as **lived-experience panels in planning processes and disability representation within city design advocacy groups**. Josse noted that such radical disability activism has been less visible in Belgium, and that this may be precisely what needs to change.

Brussels

Chaos as Opportunity

Turning to Brussels' chronic political paralysis—unfinished construction sites, prolonged absence of a government—responses were unexpectedly optimistic.

Josse argued that **Brussels' chaos makes it fertile ground for activism**. In more regulated cities, grassroots initiatives are often co-opted and neutralized through bureaucracy.

**"If no one's there to tell you off,
maybe just build the ramps."**

–Poppy

In Brussels, disorder leaves space for experimentation, coalition-building, and intersectional struggle. Poppy echoed this sentiment with a historical anecdote: in 1960s Berkeley, activists simply poured concrete themselves to create curb cuts. "If no one's there to tell you off," she suggested, "maybe just build the ramps."

Cultural institutions like Recyclart were identified as key actors in this process – spaces where imagination, art, politics, and access can intersect meaningfully.

Imagination, Desire, and Representation

Henri returned the discussion to the **power of collective imagination**. Beyond norms and audits, he argued, **society must cultivate desire: desire to be close to Disabled people, to see them as attractive, complex, and fully human**. Representation matters. While able-bodied characters perform impossible feats in films, Disabled characters are rarely allowed depth, agency, or desirability.

Changing how disability is imagined, he suggested, is a foundational step toward changing how cities are built.

Where to Begin

Community, Care, and Persistence

In closing, speakers were asked where to begin. The answers converged around community. Fighting for access is relentless and emotionally draining. Burnout is real. What sustains movements is mutual recognition, shared laughter, grief, and joy. Josse invoked the ACT UP movement during the AIDS crisis: **"We buried our friends in the morning, protested in the afternoon, and partied at night."**

Activism, they argued, requires spaces to grieve, to organize, and to celebrate. The evening concluded not with neatly packaged solutions, but with a clear message: **Disabled people have always been here, they are already organizing, already imagining futures**. The city must catch up – not by treating access as an afterthought, but by recognizing **disability as a valuable, desirable, and indispensable part of urban life**.

Crip Reading List

Selected readings and documents compiled by Fien Criel.

Self-Published, Belgian Authors

- Rekto:Verso, nr. 91: CRIP
- Van Goidsenhoven, Leni. (On)gehoord
- Van Ertvelde, Anaïs. Handicap, een bevrijding
- Van Ertvelde, Anaïs. Zorgangst
- Cornette, Josefien. Non/ableism (pamphlet)

Foundational Academic Works

- Goodley, Dan. (2017). Disability Studies: An Interdisciplinary Introduction (2nd ed.).
- Ahmed, Sara. On Being Included
- Ahmed, Sara. Living a Feminist Life
- Ahmed, Sara. The Feminist Killjoy Handbook
- Michalko, Rod. (2002). The Difference That Disability Makes
- Mitchell, David T., & Snyder, Sharon L. (2015). The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism, and Peripheral Embodiment
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. Extraordinary Bodies
- Wong, Alice. Disability Visibility
- Davis, Lennard J. Enforcing Normalcy
- Foucault, Michel. The Birth of the Clinic
- McRuer, Robert. Crip Theory
- McRuer, Robert. Crip Time
- Braidotti, Rosi. Posthuman Knowledge
- Braidotti, Rosi. Posthuman Feminism

Crip Reading List

Selected readings and documents compiled by Fien Criel.

Feminism, Critical Perspectives, and Cultural Models

- Hamraie, Aimi, & Fritsch, Kelly. (2019). Crip Technoscience Manifesto
- Harney, Stefano, & Moten, Fred. (2013). The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study
- Lorde, Audre. The Cancer Journals
- Lorde, Audre. Your Silence Will Not Protect You
- Rapp Black, Emily. Frida Kahlo and My Left Leg
- Siebers, Tobin. Disability Aesthetics
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. Can the Subaltern Speak?
- Puar, Jasbir K. The Right to Maim
- Godin, M. Leona. There Plant Eyes
- Kern, Leslie. Feminist City
- Hattrick, Alice. Ill Feelings
- Herrera, Hayden. Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo
- Hedva, Johanna. Theory of a Sick Woman
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice
- Piepzna-Samarasinha, Leah Lakshmi. The Future Is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes and Mourning Songs
- Guffey, Elizabeth. After Universal Design: The Disability Design Revolution

STADPLURAAL 2026

Accessible Nightlife Rethinking Club Design

Club Dérive
Dancefloor Intimacy UK
Montage
Antonella Candiago
Giu Paluku-Atoka
The Wheelies Project

11.02.2026

Accessible Nightlife

Rethinking Club Design

The second session of our 2026 STADPLURAAL series at Recyclart explored what it takes to make the city's nightlife as accessible as possible – and how despite all its trials and tribulations, it continues to be a space of liberation.

The panelists spoke about necessary material changes in spatial design as well as systematic challenges in education and funding. However, the central question remained: **what does nightlife do, and for whom? What would club nights look like if they were designed around the lived experiences of Disabled, Neurodivergent, and chronically ill people?**

Born from a desire to learn and make changes first in their own space, Recyclart hosted a part of the accessibility workshops in 2025 organized by **Montage, Club Dérive, and Dancefloor Intimacy** leading to a club night in November 2025. After a period of reflection, this Stadpluraal session offered the collaborators a moment to discuss the challenges of their work: what was successfully implemented, what still feels unresolved, who are they really building for?

Ultimately, we are reminded that if nightlife is a space, time and atmosphere for chance encounters, intimacy, joy, and release, then **any barrier to entry—particularly along ableist lines—isn't just incidental but it's a structural shortcoming we need to dismantle.**

But where do we begin?

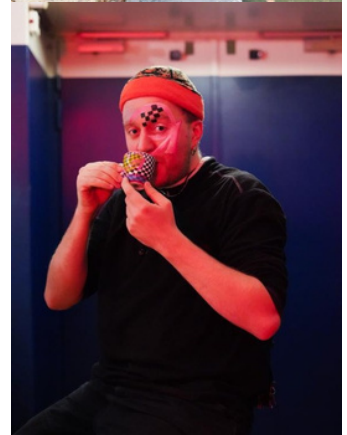
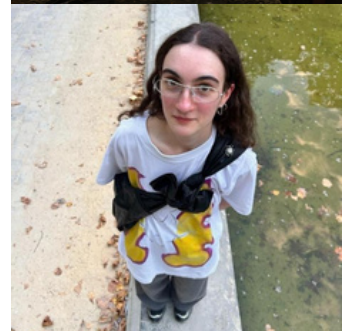
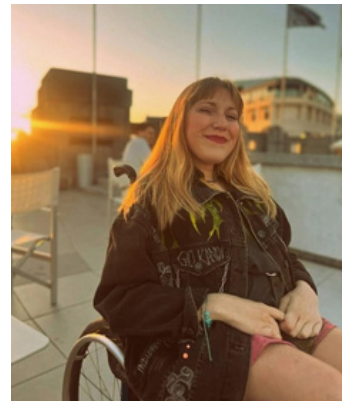
Speakers + Contributions

The discussion brought together activists, designers and researchers with or without disability, neurodivergency and/or chronic illness working across cultural events, spatial practice, education, and advocacy:

Antonella Candiago (she/her) is a gender and disability rights advocate. Drawing from her experience as a wheelchair user, she works to dismantle ableism and promote inclusion, self-determination, and sexual justice through education.

Ali Wagner (she/her) is an artist, nightlife researcher, event producer and accessibility advocate. Her project Dancefloor Intimacy UK uses research and education to work with nightlife stakeholders and the community to drive changes in music venues and club ecosystems.

Laura Conant (she/her) and **Jonathan Cant** (he/him) run the label and event series Montage. They work together to politicize electronic music through events and fundraisers. Their most recent work focuses on accessibility in an effort for inclusivity through open discourse.



Portraits courtesy of the speakers.

Speakers + Contributions

Clara Golfa Sambay is a multidisciplinary artist, DJ, scenographer and prevention advisor. With **Club Dérive**, her experimental club research/design practice, she investigates how nightlife environments can become more inclusive and socially engaged without compromising artistic freedom.

Through **The Wheelies Project**, **Henri Bistuer** (he/him) and **Alexandre Lemaire** (he/him) work with their allies to improve for accessibility and inclusion in Belgium by actively involving people with disabilities and chronic illnesses in urban analysis and action.

The conversation was moderated by **Giu Paluku-Atoka** (they/them), a multidisciplinary artist and facilitator whose work spans writing, poetry, crochet and knitting. Rooted in disability justice, trans and queer revolution, their practice explores how we hold grief and joy in community.



Portraits courtesy of the speakers.

The Right to Desire

Antonella began by sharing her research and personal experience of **nightlife as a critical site for relationship-building and sexual exploration**. Growing up in a cultural context where sex education is either absent or exclusionary, Antonella is committed to opening a dialogue about intimacy that prioritizes agency and care for all through proactive information exchange.

She emphasized that exclusion begins at the level of insufficient communication. Lack of transparency around whether a venue is accessible produces significant mental strain for Disabled or Neurodivergent nightlife participants even as they make the decision to go out for the night.

“Disabled people are objectified as inspirational simply for existing in spaces that are often not designed for us”

–Antonella

The challenges continue upon arrival at the venue in how ableism shows up in subtle, social ways. **Everyday interactions—unsolicited comments or lack of personal boundaries—position the presence of a Disabled person as fodder for “inspiration porn”.**

The Right to Desire

As she puts it, “Disabled people are objectified as inspirational simply for existing in spaces that are often not designed for us”. In terms of physical intimacy, this **exceptionalism manifests as swinging between desexualization and hypersexualization, particularly affecting women and queer people**. This limits the possibility of consensual, self-determined experiences of pleasure.



Photograph by Ahmed Abu Awad

Drawing on Telila L. Lewis’ definition, **Antonella places ableism within broader histories of exclusion: eugenics, anti-Blackness, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism, and capitalism as systems that assign value to people's bodies and minds**. Giu points out that it’s crucial to be aware of the way “politics actually play out in relation to who is able to do what and how and when”.

Accessibility then extends beyond technicality, forcing us to rethink how nightlife is organized in our everyday lives.

Accessibility as a Collective Win

Ali started her presentation with a simple visual self-description. “Today I’m wearing a purple hoodie, blue jeans, and I’ve got black slash brown hair.” This practice of visual access reflects an important lesson for Ali: **we can’t make assumptions about who is in the room or what their needs are.**

To her, accessibility stands at the forefront of club culture. Through Dancefloor Intimacy, she acts as **a bridge between marginalized communities and venue operators** (from club owners and DJs to bar staff and security), translating unheard needs into tangible changes.

Grounded in human-centered research methodology—focus groups, interviews, and surveys—**Dancefloor Intimacy reinforces that Disabled participants are the experts of their own experience.** Honest dialogue and exchange across the vantage points of different stakeholders helps her actively (re)design nightlife experience.

Working with venues across the UK, from grassroots projects in Birkenhead to nightlife institutions like fabric London, Ali highlights gaps between intention and implementation.

**“If we’re designing for the minority,
we’re actually designing for the majority.”**

–Ali

Accessibility as a Collective Win

Rather than advancing theoretical discourse, **she lets us in on the unglamorous reality of accessibility advocacy: tedious administration, funding constraints, the psychological and physical labor of mediating between stakeholders.** Despite—and because of—it all, we see changes that move beyond lip service and are truly felt on the ground.



Photograph by Ahmed Abu Awad

“If we’re designing for the minority, we’re actually designing for the majority”, she says. Ultimately, her work stems from a willingness and ability to imagine a utopian nightlife for all, making accessibility a collective benefit.

Barriers to Entry

Jonathan and Laura's work is guided by the belief that being 'alternative' or claiming to follow **an 'alternative culture' must reflect a commitment to doing things differently; to challenge the social and cultural norms of our time.**

Nightlife is where people share ideas and values, and through it a sense of belonging, but this only holds true if access is taken seriously. **If nightlife is meant to carry any political power—through organizing, co-creating, and community building—then everyone should be there. Or at least have the option to be.**

Clara brings design and psychogeography into the fold, studying how **space shapes movement, behavior, and emotion.**



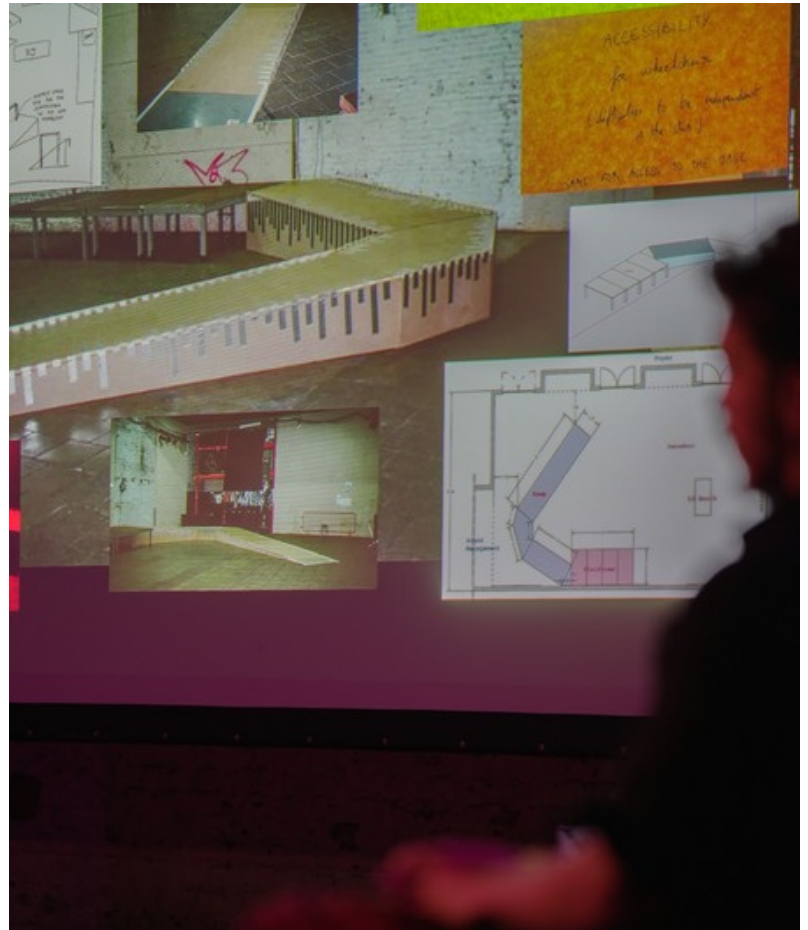
Photograph by Club Dérive

Barriers to Entry

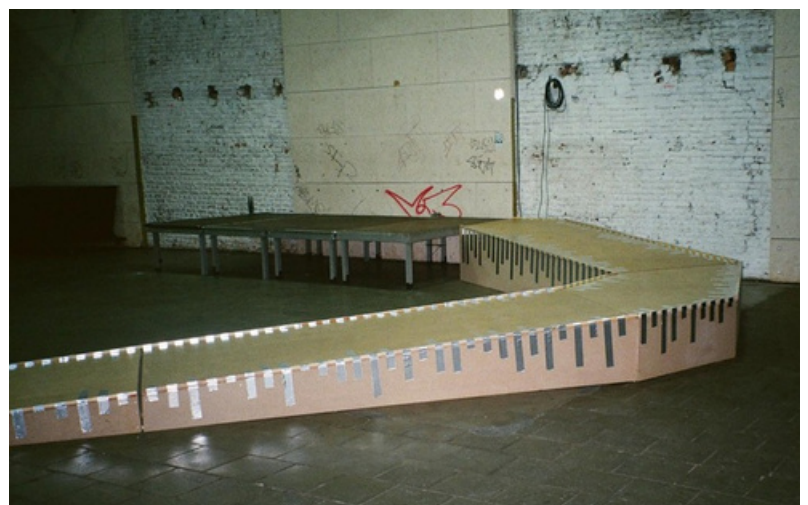
In November, she used participant feedback to map access barriers at Recyclart, from circulation issues to unclear transitions between spaces and sensory overload.

Through a scenographic exercise, she designed a **ramp** across the dancefloor to introduce a new vantage point, changing the way people with varying accessibility needs occupy the space around the DJ.

She used textile and lighting elements to 'zone' the club and created a low-sensory room. Looking back, she was transparent about the limits of the process.



Photograph by Ahmed Abu Awad



Photograph by Club Dérive

Barriers to Entry

Designing for accessibility raised questions of legitimacy: who gets to design, and based on whose experience? She highlighted an important but overlooked structural gap in design education: **inaccessibility limits who can enter the classroom, let alone the work field, resulting in a lack of diverse perspectives.** Jonathan then reflected on the financial constraints of such an initiative. The event in November operated at a loss, revealing how accessibility is expected to be absorbed within already dwindling cultural budgets. **Nightlife remains categorized as ‘entertainment’ rather than an artistic field or ‘discipline’, diluting its legitimacy for funding opportunities.** This makes participation expensive—as seen in rising ticket prices—pushing out those already socioeconomically and physically vulnerable.

For nightlife to be taken seriously, its funding structures must catch up.



Photograph by Ahmed Abu Awad

Whose level are we on?

Alex candidly shared how music and club spaces supported him through periods of depression, framing **nightlife as something that can actively support mental health**. Instead of keeping this abstract, he brought our attention to the body: how rhythm stabilizes our breath and heart rate, moving between intense and quieter spaces mirrors the nervous system, and how dancing with others helps us co-regulate. **The feeling of being welcomed in a space is what reduces shame and makes room for new solidarities.**



Photographs by Ahmed Abu Awad

Whose level are we on?

Henri – the second half of The Wheelies being on stage – shared his experiences with various clubs in Brussels and Berlin. In particular, he responded to the design interventions for accessibility at Recyclart: the challenge of the cobblestone entrance, the ease of circulation inside, the significance of something as basic as a comfortable, accessible toilet.

At the same time, it revealed lingering social dynamics. **The platform, while accessible, became a “designated space”, limiting spontaneous mixing.** As he observed, “the issue was that as we arrived, others would leave immediately, like pigeons scattering in the Saint Mark's Square in Venice” – sometimes taking away from the beauty of nightlife, which is to allow different bodies to mix.

“As we arrived, others would leave immediately, like pigeons scattering in the Saint Mark's Square in Venice.”

–Henri

Alex and Henri's experiences highlight a distinction between access as a provisional measure and access as experience. **It's not just about how one enters a space, but more about how they inhabit it and relate to the different bodies within it.**

What next?

Or what has always been?

The conversation – with all its frustration, joy, humour, and hope – made it clear that accessibility doesn't depend on a series of groundbreaking interventions. The truth is, **the work has been happening all along**. While designers and stakeholders conflate disability and fragility, Disabled people challenge ableist norms everyday by co-producing knowledge and tactics to access everyday spaces of joy, recreation, leisure and community.



Photograph by Ahmed Abu Awad

Tying it together, Giu reminds us that the **question of access is intersectional; that we can't talk about who is or can be present in a space without talking about class, race, and gender as points of division that further create social tensions**. Sincere allyship lies in a willingness to learn from the lived experience of marginalized people with a commitment to redistributing decision-making power and concrete material support. **If the night is a socially and culturally mediated time and space, then nightlife is inherently political – and we must work to keep it that way.**

STADPLURAAL 2026

Who gets in? Accessibility Across New & Historic Architecture

Enka Blanchard
Negin Eisazadeh
Josse Cornette

06.05.2026

Who gets in?

Accessibility across New and Historic Architecture

The third session of our STADPLURAAL 2026 series at Recyclart asks why, despite regulations, our buildings remain widely inaccessible.

Drawing from research with diverse bodies and minds as well as extensive data analysis, the session highlighted the **gaps between legal compliance and lived accessibility**.

The conversation spanned an analysis of building design from distinct time periods – from 15th century heritage to contemporary architecture emerging at the turn of the millennium – and examined the state of architecture education today to reveal whose experiences are truly being considered in our cities.

If our built environment reflects, shapes, and at times challenges societal values, what does it mean when Disabled users continue to be excluded from these sites?

In a conversation moderated by artist, researcher, and Disabled peer Josse Cornette, researchers Enka Blanchard and Negin Eisazadeh expand this interrogation through their expertise in architectural history, engineering, geography, and Disability studies combined.

Speakers + Contributions

Enka Blanchard (they/them) is a transdisciplinary researcher at the CNRS (French National Centre for Scientific Research) at LAMSADE (Université Paris Dauphine PSL, France) and an associate researcher at the CNRS Centre for Internet and Society. Their initial area of expertise focused on the human aspects of security (particularly voting technologies), with numerous publications on the design of secure and accessible voting systems. More recently, they have broadened their research to include the geographies of disability and the differences in spatial experiences of people with disabilities.



Portrait courtesy of the speakers.

Negin Eisazadeh (she/her) is an engineer architect- (University of Tehran) and an architectural historian (Shahid Beheshti University, Iran). She also holds advanced master's degrees in the conservation of monuments and sites (RLICC, KU Leuven) and in digital humanities (KU Leuven). She defended her doctoral thesis (ULiège and KU Leuven) in September 2025, which explored how diverse experiences of heritage can inform more inclusive approaches to its conservation.



Portrait courtesy of the speakers.

Speakers + Contributions

Josse (Josefien) Cornette (they/them), born in 1994 in Belgium, studied visual arts (LUCA School of Arts, Ghent), art history, and gender and diversity studies (UGent). They define themselves as a Disabled artist. Born with a rare congenital condition, fibular hemimelia, they develop a hybrid practice rooted in artistic research. They often work in the fields of critical disability studies, critical trauma studies, as well as crip and queer theories.



Portrait courtesy of the speakers.

The Many Shades of Access

To begin, Negin first walked us through her PhD research titled “Towards a more inclusive approach to built heritage conservation”, to illustrate how academic discourse, material practice, and lived experiences of diverse bodies and minds can coincide to make built heritage **reachable, accessible, understandable, and usable** for as many people as possible.

By defining inclusivity by the different ways in which it is experienced, Negin and her collaborators use the term responsibly and concretely, without diluting what it means.

Before exploring the details of her field work, Negin delved into the frameworks and concepts of inclusive design that inspire her work. Resisting narrow functionality and the pass/fail compliance check that’s unfortunately the norm in mainstream design practice, Negin approaches spatial design as a form of social care and cultural value. Her work builds on the understanding that **human diversity is in fact the norm, and that Disability is relational, resulting from a mismatch between the built environment and the needs of diverse bodies and minds, which can vary across society and one's lifespan.**

In her presentation, Negin specifically talks about her fieldwork at the monumental 15th-century Leuven Town Hall to share how her conversations with user/experts at the heritage site revealed a vast range of ways in which different individuals experience the different spaces and elements in this site. **She uses the term ‘user/expert’ – coined by renowned educator and accessibility advocate Elaine Ostroff – to highlight the invaluable spatial knowledge that diverse bodies and minds cultivate in their navigation of ableist design, and how they can actively influence architectural practice.**

The Many Shades of Access

After several years of being closed to the public, the city of Leuven organized a design competition for the Town Hall's conservation and adaptive reuse with a focus on accessibility.



Top image, from right to left:

- Rue Hors-Château, Liège. © Negin Eisazadeh, 2018.
- Place St-Barthélemy, Liège. © Virginia Barbaro, 2018.
- Cité Miroir, Liège. © Maxime Coq, 2020.
- Cité Miroir, Liège. © Negin Eisazadeh, 2020.
- The Leuven Town Hall, Leuven. Peter-Willem Vermeersch, 2020.
- The Leuven Town Hall, Leuven. © Piet Tutenel, 2021.

Left image:

- The Leuven Town Hall. © Negin Eisazadeh, 2020.

The Many Shades of Access

Negin and her team joined the project soon after the winning proposal was selected, helping the designers learn from disability experience to inform their design. Through in-situ 'go-along' interviews, she and her team recorded different participants' responses to the Town Hall's existing architecture. For instance, the windows in the building provided a grounding anchor for a participant with autism; the natural light filtering through served as a mode of wayfinding for a visually impaired participant; and for another with a hearing impairment, it provided the necessary lighting to make lip-reading easier.

These examples show us how different architectural elements carry **'affordances' – or the possibilities for action born out of the call and response between the environment and a person's unique abilities.** Coined by psychologist James J. Gibson in 1979 and later refined by Dutch philosophers Erik Rietveld and Julian Kiverstein, 'affordances' offer a useful conceptual framework to better understand how architectural elements support or hinder user/experts' actions and interactions.

But how can an understanding of these nuances be translated into practice?

Turning Narratives to Spatial Action

After fieldwork and conversations with user/ experts begins the second, equally crucial half of Negin's work – presenting the lessons learned in a form that can be shared with designers, city officials, and the user/experts, each group coming in with different interests and background knowledge.

First, Negin uses the '**gradient of accessibility**' – an analytical tool that **deconstructs spatial experiences into varying levels of ease and obstruction**: obstacles that are a) impossible to overcome, b) can be overcome with a specific tactic or workaround c) can be overcome with assistance from someone else, and d) obstacles that can be overcome independently. A final category is that of '**qualities**' that are experienced as positive aspects and can help a user feel welcome.

The use of the gradient of accessibility alongside the concept of affordances allows an understanding of **space as multifaceted, dynamic, and relational**. This information is then presented by the research in graphic and text-based formats to represent in detail the range of experiences they learnt from. The graphic formats are presented in ways that correspond to architects' visual ways of working. The text report complements the graphic report and further elaborates on the diverse affordances and the main insights gained into the user/experts' experiences.

Turning Narratives to Spatial Action

Ultimately, Negin's research shows us the interconnected systems of allyship, knowledge, and bureaucracy that need to work in tandem to affect concrete change on ground; it asks us to creatively tackle academic research in a way that it can shape-shift into actionable tools.

More importantly, instead of dismissing the technocratic requirements of standardization and quantifiable systems, Negin's research tries to further nuance accessibility. By helping designers understand how and under what conditions spatial elements become qualities or obstacles, she raises attention to the many ways in which our bodies experience space.



An example page of the graphic report using the building plan. © Negin Eisazadeh

Out of Sight Out of Mind

Enka's presentation as a quantitative researcher and computer scientist takes us to the next step in the evening's discussion. Moving on from personal narratives and encounters with a specific site, Enka's data analysis of contemporary architecture gives us a bird's eye view of ableism as an exclusionary, systemic challenge of everyday city buildings. She also studied every one of the one thousand buildings featured in the *Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture* – a global survey said to represent the 'best of architecture' between 1998 and 2003.



The Phaidon Atlas of Contemporary World Architecture. © Phaidon 2004

With their expertise in geography and Disability studies, Enka's research highlights how architectural taxonomy and everyday urban infrastructure co-produce a hostile network of physical and invisible boundaries that keeps Disabled bodies from participating in public life with dignity. By mapping the evolution of design trends over time, we see how useful (or not) certain changes have been in terms of their accessibility. Enka illustrates this through the example of a 'stramp' – a mid-century structure that combines stairs with a ramp. As well-intentioned as it may have been, it proves to be extremely hazardous for wheelchairs users, where a small steering error can push them towards the steps.

Out of Sight

Out of Mind

Several design failures we see even today echo a deeper tension between practical needs and institutional obsession with aesthetic appeal.

Enka highlights how the mechanics of inclusion are manifest in architectural plans – for example, while there are global standards for rendering staircases, there is zero consensus on how to draw an elevator. **Staircases are romanticized and used to flex creative flair, while elevators are set aside into dark corners as unappealing liabilities.**

This pattern isn't a subtle strategy but is openly awarded. Enka recalls a particular nomination for the UK's prestigious Stirling Prize, a project that was openly praised because: *"...The buildings have been sensitively repaired and the site made accessible through clever manipulation of landscaping, avoiding the need for obvious ramps and handrails."*

Ironically, this was a project for a hotel explicitly designed to host Disabled guests. **The tendency to deliberately invisibilise the question of accessibility lies in the blueprint.**

Leaving Accessibility at the Door

Zooming into the micro-scale of the street, Enka uses Google Street View to gain further empirical data rather than relying on photographs alone.

‘Walking’ through street views lets Enka and their team evaluate the entrances of thousands of buildings to check for a basic but crucial entry requirement: a single physical step at a storefront or house entrance. If a step was found, it indicated a basic failure; if it was flat or had a ramp, it passed the baseline test. Enka could track these entrances over a 13-year period, mapping how cities evolve – and the results weren’t reassuring.

However, massive, commercial high-rise towers are found to be almost universally step-free – but instead of centering people, the ‘accessibility’ is prioritized for speed, profit and logistical efficiency for material goods, and young, productive, able-bodied individuals on the move.

Often, diverse users try to manage these structural failings through grassroots effort and individual tactics – an approach that’s unsustainable at best and emotionally and physically debilitating at worst. It is this relentless, unfair labour that warrants the fight for institutional responsibility.



Photograph by Recyclart team

Back to the Drawing Board

The divide between top-down assumptions about accessibility and the daily exhaustion of everyday negotiation of space is where Negin and Enka's perspectives converge.

As a common thread over the STADPLURAAL 2026 conversations, to prevent accessibility from being treated as an afterthought or an inconvenience, it is clear that we must first begin by changing our educational systems. **Material change can only happen when we shift who is in the classroom, before we are able to sustainably shift who designs, makes decisions, and influences policy.** Disabled practitioners can't be treated as passive subjects of study, but need to be empowered as researchers, architects, and teachers who can dismantle exclusionary design practices before they become the norm. Further, inclusivity can't be limited to classroom debate but as Enka reminds us, it needs to be incentivized as the default in professional fields regardless of commercial motives. The conversation **recontextualized accessibility from a technocratic, checklist-driven obligation into a collective practice of social care.** From the intimate, historical corridors of the Leuven Town Hall windows to macro-level sidewalk data, we see how **the way we treat our built environment directly mirrors our shared values as a society.**

Our buildings, old and new, need to be treated as living, breathing sites continually shaped by their relationship to the public. Ultimately, the takeaway was clear: **considering the diversity of minds, bodies, and responses into the making of our buildings and our streets is less about how we honor our past, but about how we will make way for a dignified future for everyone in our cities.**



STADPLURAAL 2026

Contributors + Links

I. Accessible Futures Architecture and Disability Justice

- Fien Criel [@fiencriel](#)
- Crippling the Space [@cripping_the_space](#)
- Poppy Levison [@poppy_levison](#)
- DisOrdinary Architecture [@disordinaryarchitecture](#)
- Henri Bistuer [@hbistuer](#)
- Josefien Cornette [@josefien_](#)
- The Wheelies Project [@thewheeliesproject](#)
- Meike de Roest [@meikederost](#)

II. Accessible Nightlife: Rethinking Club Design

- Clara Golfa Sambay, Club Dérive [@club.derive](#)
- Ali Wagner [@ali__wagner](#)
- Dancefloor Intimacy UK [@dancefloor.intimacy](#)
- Laura Conant [@lau_c_n_n_t](#)
- Jonathan Cant [@crat_j](#)
- Montage – Label [@mOnt4ge](#)
- Antonella Candiago [@antonella_cnd](#)
- Henri Bistuer [@hbistuer](#)
- The Wheelies Project [@thewheeliesproject](#)
- Photographer Ahmed Abu Awad [@ahmedawad.shot](#)



STADPLURAAL 2026

Contributors + Links

III. Who gets in? Accessibility Across New & Historic Architecture

- [Informing Heritage Conservation Through Diverse Experiences: The Case of the Leuven Town Hall](#). Contributors: Negin Eisazadeh; Peter-Willem Vermeersch; Ann Heylighen; Claudine Houbart.
- Dr Enka Blanchard [Link to website](#).
- Josefien Cornette [@josefien_](#)

recyclart.be