

# A N A R C H A E O L O G Y O F D I S A B I L I T Y

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A Research Station at the Biennale Architettura 2021, *How will we live together?* curated by Hashim Sarkis

<https://www.labiennale.org/en/architecture/2021/david-gissen-jennifer-stager-and-mantha-zarmakoupi>



The accessibility of historic architecture not only determines who can experience the past, but it also informs how we think about disabled people as part of history. This installation presents an experiment in the historic reconstruction of the Acropolis in Athens. Our reconstructions recover ideas about bodies and impairment at one of the most canonical, influential, and notoriously *inaccessible* architectural sites. We explored what it means to reconstruct lost elements of the Acropolis through the lens of human impairment. Such an approach contrasts to the pursuit of “accessible heritage” — a balance between historic authenticity of architecture and technical modifications made for accessibility. We call our alternative to accessible heritage “an archaeology of disability.”

The elements we reconstructed include an enormous 5th Century BCE ramp that once connected the Acropolis to the Agora; a gallery of paintings at the top of the ramp; and a small stone seat, described by an ancient visitor as a place to rest. The ramp’s form is reconstructed as a tactile, touch-based model that transmits vibrations like those caused by the ancient crowds, animals, and carriages. It is ringed with a frieze

of braille. The paintings, known through text, are reconstructed in sign language. This reconstruction, titled "Sēmata" (signs) is performed in a film-work. The stone seat is reconstructed in three different sizes and heights. Each is decorated with braille-like patterns that communicate the optical effect of weathered stone into a tactile form. Collectively, these reconstructions demonstrate another way to consider disability and the historic past — one that moves beyond technological fixes to physical objects. Disability emerges as a form of historical inquiry, archaeology, and reconstruction — one informed by the experience of collective human difference across space and time.

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