DOING DISABILITY DIFFERENTLY
An alternative handbook on architecture, dis/ability and designing for everyday life
Doing Disability Differently

This ground-breaking book aims to take a new and innovative view on how disability and architecture might be connected. Rather than putting disability at the end of the design process, centred mainly on compliance, it sees disability – and ability – as creative starting points. It asks the intriguing question: can working from dis/ability actually generate an alternative kind of architectural avant-garde?

To do this, *Doing Disability Differently*:

- explores how thinking about dis/ability opens up to critical and creative investigation our everyday social attitudes and practices about people, objects and space;
- argues that design can help resist and transform underlying and unnoticed inequalities;
- introduces architects to the emerging and important field of disability studies and considers what different kinds of design thinking and doing this can enable;
- asks how designing for everyday life – in all its diversity – can be better embedded within contemporary architecture as a discipline;
- offers examples of what doing disability differently can mean for architectural theory, education and professional practice;
- aims to embed into architectural practice attitudes and approaches that creatively and constructively refuse to perpetuate body ‘norms’ or the resulting inequalities in access to, and support from, built space.

Ultimately, this book suggests that re-addressing architecture and disability involves nothing less than re-thinking how to design for the everyday occupation of space more generally.

**Jos Boys** is a Teaching Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, Design and Social Sciences at the University of Northumbria. She brings together a background in architecture with a research interest in the relationships between space and its occupation, and an involvement in many disability related projects. She is co-founder of Architecture-InsideOut (AIO) which brings together disabled artists and architects in collaborative explorations of building and urban design.
In Memoriam
Georgie Wise
Doing Disability Differently
An alternative handbook on architecture, dis/ability and designing for everyday life

Jos Boys
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Introduction
Why do disability differently?

In an ongoing project called *The Disabled Avant-Garde Today!* artists Katherine Araniello and Aaron Williamson respond to, and re-make artwork based on, some seminal creative practitioners including Jake and Dinos Chapman, Leigh Bowery, Simon and Garfunkel, Martin Kippenberger, Tom and Jerry and Busby Berkeley. Through a series of videos the artists (re-)perform their various artistic and cultural (non-disabled) heroes and are by turns hilarious, absurd and sarcastic commentators, as shown in Plate 1 of the colour section. Though humorous, their point is a savage one – nobody will, of course, ever believe that disabled people could actually form a creative and artistic avant-garde.

Here, though, I want to suggest that starting from disability – rather than treating it as an afterthought to building design – does have the potential to generate some truly radical, avant-garde and creative architectural practices. This is because architecture is centrally concerned with both peoples’ needs and desires (in all their diversity), and is one of the means through which our everyday social and spatial practices1 are orchestrated. Thinking more explicitly about disability and being more attentive to disabled and Deaf2 people themselves, can split open our commonsense assumptions about how the world ‘normally’ works, and make new opportunities for creating different kinds of designed spaces.

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1 ‘Social and spatial practices’ is a phrase that will be used a lot in this book. It is a shorthand way of describing the relationships between material space and the activities that go on in it as a continual process of enacting the ‘normality’ of our everyday, un-thought-about routines. Spaces, objects and encounters with others are seen as the (partial, complex and uneven) mechanisms through which particular ways of understanding the world are perpetuated over others, but also contested and adapted.

2 Many Deaf people, particularly those who use BSL (British Sign Language), argue that they are a linguistic minority with their own language and culture, and therefore do not define themselves as disabled. For this reason, in some disability writing the term disabled and Deaf people is used. The use of a capital D for Deaf recognises this differentiation; acknowledging that many people who use sign language have a strongly developed sense of their own cultural identity (see glossary). In this book, I use deaf when talking about people in general, and Deaf when referring to the cultural and political movement.
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As disabled people, we are forced to constantly evaluate form and function and engage creatively with practical problems around negotiating space.

(Damian Toal, Making Discursive Spaces Project, University of Brighton: blog 8 April 2007)

Why, then, does the idea of disability being creative and avant-garde seem so absurd? Is it because of taken-for-granted assumptions about disabled people: that they are in need of the help of others, are passive consumers of services, constitute a minority of individuals in society who (unfortunately) must bear the brunt of their own medical problems? Is it because creativity slips sideways into ‘art therapy’ when undertaken by disabled people, and into functional and clinical solutions when undertaken by architects? What if, instead, we see that re-thinking disability enables us to explore critically and creatively assumptions about, and relationships between, disability and ability, which, in turn, can offer better ways of understanding the architectural implications of both bodily diversity and everyday socio-spatial practices? What if we actually engage with what Partington-Sollinger calls disabled peoples’ ‘particular prowess for “reading space”’ (2008), or as Tobin Siebers says:

. . . disabled people have to be ingenious to live in societies that are by their design inaccessible and by their inclination prejudiced against disability. It requires a great deal of artfulness and creativity to figure out how to make it through the day when you are disabled, given the condition of our society.

(Siebers 2010b online)

Disabled people then are not just passive users of services and buildings, but can offer something powerful back to architects and other built environment professionals. Crucially, however, this is about much more that just better defining diverse individual needs and desires so as to better inform architectural design. It is also about disentangling how ‘commonsense’ stereotypes of disability actually prevent our better understanding of the inter-relationships between material space and its occupancies3 – not just for disabled people, but for everyone. This is because properly engaging with disabled peoples’ experiences starts to

3 I have chosen to mainly use the term ‘occupancies’ as a way of describing the entangled relationships between people, buildings, objects and spaces. Other common terms, such as use or inhabitation, seem quite problematic, because they remain connected to older cause–effect, stimuli–response, man–environment, subject–object framings, which persistently separate out the person from space. Meanwhile the ‘newer’ terms being introduced to grapple with this difficulty – choreography, enactments, performance – all also have their limitations in focusing on describing the dynamic qualities of our engagements with space, rather than on social practices. In fact, what is most interesting is how lacking language is in being able to express our ordinary (and diverse) inter-weavings of social and spatial experiences.
challenge simplistic and unspoken divisions between disability and ability, to expose the many assumptions and problems in architectural framings of the ‘user’ more generally, and to open up other kinds of creativity through refusing to perpetuate assumptions about disabled people (Figure 0.1).

Re-thinking practices
Despite many years of campaigning and design effort, the built environment continues to be often inaccessible to disabled people. However, this book aims to show that this is not because architects are too egotistical to take disabled people seriously – often what they are accused of – but instead the result of the underlying commonsense conceptual frameworks we all use to think about disability, ability, occupancies and material space. This affects not only the assumptions abled⁴ people make in their everyday lives about what being

Figure 0.1 Balls! One of a series of performances exploring disability through playfulness, Turbine Hall, Tate Modern, London by architects Architype and disabled artists Caroline Cardus and Joolz Cave Berry, as part of Arts Council South East funded Architecture-InsideOut event (AIO), 10 May 2008. Photography: Jos Boys.

⁴ In the UK words like ‘cripple’ and ‘handicapped’ are no longer commonly used to describe disabled people (or people with disabilities, or ‘physically challenged’ people or any of the other terms that circulate in different places and periods). At the same time, disabled people have not only come up with subversive terms for themselves (such as crips and misfits) but also for the ‘able-bodied’. Many use the term non-disabled whilst, for example, for Asperger’s and autistic activists, ‘normal’ people are often known – disparagingly – as normo-typicals. Here I use ‘abled’, because it names the specific, usually unspoken characteristics by which the non-disabled assume their own experiences to be obvious and unproblematic.
disabled ‘is like’ but also the underlying beliefs of architectural theory and practice. So, despite the centrality of architectural design and the built environment to the lives of most disabled people, there remains little serious critical theoretical work in this area. It is important to ask why architecture does not yet have a body of work around disability equivalent to that exploring gender and sexuality, or race and post-colonialism (Matrix 1984, Colomina 1996, Borden et al. 1999, Lokko 1999, McCorquodale et al. 2001). That this invisibility is reflected across other academic and professional disciplines is an indictment of cultural and critical theory and practice more generally, and illustrates just how deeply disability remains avoided, compared to other disadvantaged identities. Yet this is at a time when disability studies is emerging as an important and creative field, challenging both ‘medical’ and ‘social’ models of disability; and critically engaging with key contemporary ideas around post-modernism, feminism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post-humanism. Over the last 40 years disability studies has become an energetic and relevant – if highly contested – field, yet it remains largely ignored by architects, including many of its accessibility and inclusive design specialists, and by architectural theorists and critics.

At the same time, there has been within the disability field a tendency, reflecting more general popular beliefs, to assume that the design professions ignore the demands of disabled people because of architects’ over-powering egos and creative arrogance. When it comes to critiquing the built environment, debate seems to be restricted by the assumption that designing for people in general, and for the disabled in particular, is obvious and easy; that all that is required is the right kind of effort by architects and then everything will be ‘all right’. Here, I take a different position, arguing that starting from disability does not lead to universal or simple design solutions but instead opens up to creative engagement the complex, messy and often contradictory intersections of our diverse lives with others, artefacts and material space; an approach that has ramifications for the very shape of architecture’s knowledge base across theory, practice and education. This position aims to expose how disability is persistently framed, both by ‘normal’ social and spatial practices and by architecture’s own internal discourses, as only affecting architecture sometimes, making disabled people what Tanya Titchkosky calls ‘included as excludable’ (2011). It explores the disabling effects this has on disabled peoples’ lives, on our understandings of disability and ability, on the shaping of material space and on architecture as a discipline. What I aim to offer architects instead are some ideas, strategies and tactics for thinking and doing building design that can go beyond the frustrating limitations of the current relationship of architecture to disability, structured through compliance – regulations and design guidance – underpinned by an (unnoticed) conceptual framework that keeps disability in its ‘place’. This means also unravelling the effects of architects continuing to treat disability in a stereotypical and mechanical way, as an add-on to the ‘proper’ design process. And it means asking why disabled people seem marooned as marginal and invisible in architectural discourse.
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and practice, despite the wider contemporary turn in the subject towards concepts centred around the body, such as embodiment, affect, difference and hybridity.

In Doing Disability Differently, disability and ability are understood as ambiguous, complex, inter-related and often contradictory categories. Design for disability is not simple, but demands a careful unpicking of how we frame such categories in the first place. This requires taking attentive notice of the many diverse disabled narratives and strategies for creatively surviving in our unequal world, as well as critically analysing commonsense assumptions about both disability and ability and the ways these become embodied in existing ‘ordinary’ social and spatial practices, such that disabled people are persistently left out. It proposes that architecture can challenge and shift ideas about, and practices around, disability and ability, that is around diverse occupancies, by designing from these complexities and contradictions; by opening up its own internal design discourses to critical investigation; and by creatively exploiting the gaps and openings in architectural theories and practices towards a better understanding of difference. Ultimately, this suggests that re-addressing architecture and disability involves nothing less than re-thinking how we articulate the inhabitation of designed space more generally.

Finally, it should be noted that many of the issues raised here are not just specific to architecture. Contemporary cultural theorists in many fields are exploring how to break out of a commonsense framing of the world through binary oppositions – whether disabled/abled, mind/body, art/science or ideas/practicalities – challenging the very structure of language, imbued with such divisions (Stengers 2000, Thrift 2007, Latour 2007a, Ingold 2011). Critical theory across the arts and humanities is currently examining how to better conceptualize and articulate the intersections of individuals, society and space as situated, embodied, specific, partial and dynamic rather than framed within simplistic binary relationships. It is shifting away from concerns with representation and cultural meaning (what things ‘say’) to the non-representational, to how life is performed (what things ‘do’). Starting from disability, I suggest, also enables critical and creative engagement with these wider concerns, informing how we work towards making better sense of the world, so that we can act towards improving it.

Using this handbook

Doing Disability Differently has been written with many audiences in mind – architectural theorists and practitioners, educators and architectural students, other built environment professionals and those in related academic fields, disabled writers, artists and activists, and all those interested in ways of improving the built environment for disabled people. Whilst it can be read chronologically, readers are also welcome to ‘dip’ into the sections they find most relevant. The book ranges across theories and examples, personal interpretations and sustained analysis, underpinned by diverse voices rather than a single authorial
viewpoint. The overall argument is, of course, ultimately mine, and does not speak for the many other people who have contributed. In covering a lot of ground the work also fails to do full justice to the depth, variation and value of disability studies, to the already existing and important work in accessible and inclusive design, or to the range and concerns of architectural practice and theories more widely. Writing as a non-disabled person, the claim is not to speak for disabled people, but to take responsibility for how abled people perpetuate the marginalization of the disabled, to refuse to ignore that situation and to be part of a movement for change.

*Doing Disability Differently* had its genesis in, and is deeply informed by, both a series of collaborations with disabled artists and the richness of work coming out of disability studies. It also follows one of the central tenets of disability studies – research and practice must be more than an academic endeavour, also aiming to improve the position of disabled people in society. Whilst architecture as it is taught and practised also has a strong underlying social commitment, this usually remains too vague and generalized to have any recognizable mainstream impact. This is particularly true of dis/ability which remains under-theorized and under-developed, even in radical and community-based practice. Disability fails to be properly embedded in the way architects are trained to think about the world, or to ‘do’ design; for, as I have already suggested, it is the very shape of the discipline’s own knowledge base that can *mitigate against* making any real changes for disabled people. This is because, to paraphrase Mark Wigley:

The active production of *(disabled/non-disabled)* distinctions can be found at every level of architectural discourse: in its rituals of legitimation, hiring practices, classification systems, lecture techniques, publicity images, canon formation, division of labour, bibliographies, design conventions, legal codes, salary structures, publishing practices, language, professional ethics, editing protocols, project credits, etc.

(Wigley 1996: 329, italics added)

Part of the intention in this book, then, is to expose just when and how slippages occur in design thinking and doing, which ultimately act to make disability disappear (or to appear only sometimes). It is to argue for a renewed social responsibility by architects that accepts and responds to such critiques, not only in specific cases, but also in the very structure of its disciplinary frameworks (Wigley 1991).

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5 A final point on terminology. Whilst I use the terms disabled and abled to ‘name’ people differently depending on their bodily and mental capacities, I also argue that the boundaries between disability and ability are ambiguous and porous; and that disability and ability need to be explored together, not separately. The term dis/ability is therefore used to express such complex entanglements between and across all our many bodies, and to remind us of the endless overlaps and slippages between being abled and disabled.
But focusing on the gaps in architectural theory, education and practice through which disability falls, and arguing for a different kind of socially responsive practice, is not to insist on a form of architectural practice that is merely well meaning, ‘politically correct’ and (therefore ‘inherently’) dull. I started this chapter by imagining the possibility of an intertwining of a different kind of architecture with a disabled avant-garde. As Williamson writes, the aim of his work is:

a politicised, yet humorous sensibility towards disability. Mostly, I devise unique artworks that are created on-site immediately prior to their public presentation. These consider the situation I encounter and represent, in part, my response to it. A constant theme is to challenge and subvert the romantic valorisation of social ‘outsiderness’ and thus I portray myself in performances and videos in the guise of sham-shamans, pretend-primitives, hoax-hermits, fake feral children, charlatan saints and dubious monsters. With these figures I explore and devise humorous or absurd actions that reference and pay homage to the ‘classic’ period of performance art in the 1960s and 70s.

(Williamson 2013 online)

Other writers and artists have dealt with issues that speak from disability but go far beyond its limited medical definition. These include the fragility of bodies, the powerful and powerless qualities of being an outsider, strangeness and normality, diversity and difference, communalities and interdependencies, isolation and independence (Figure 0.2), all of which offer potential new forms of architectural thinking and doing at the intersections of bodies, artefacts, encounters and material spaces. In this book I will return to this work often, as a means of generating creative and constructive engagements with dis/ability. It is such inventive spaces, I suggest, that can form the basis for an alternative – even avant-garde – architecture in which disabled bodies become central, not peripheral.
Because my body is visibly disabled that body will always be read into my work, so it is probably worth considering from the start rather than ignoring it. But my work is really about taking the risk of being out of control.

(Noemi Lakmaier, 2013 interview with Jos Boys)
Section I

Starting from disability
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