JOS BOYS

DOING DISABILITY DIFFERENTLY

An alternative handbook on architecture, dis/ability and designing for everyday life

ROUTLEDGE

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.

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In Memoriam
Georgie Wise

Doing Disability Differently

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Jos Boys

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Contents

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> **The interpretive act of justification is intimately tied to collective understandings of the meaning of what is. As an interpretive social act, justification is not merely second order to the fact of exclusion . . . it is how we *do* exclusion as well as *generate* its everyday sensibility.**
>
> (Titchkoksy 2008: 41)

Including as excludable

The various writings of Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko offer a powerful example of understanding disability as not only always blurring with 'ability', but also as persistently framed by commonsense assumptions of 'what the world is like'. In 'To Pee or Not to Pee?' (2008) and *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (2011) Titchkosky is particularly interested in what it is possible (ordinary, normal) to say about making changes to the built environment that can improve the everyday experiences of disabled people. She examined her own workplace (a Canadian university) and both its intentions around, and implementation of, accessible building design, particularly accessible toilets. She proposes that the commonsense view of many of her colleagues towards disabled people is that whilst 'anyone' will be aware of disability, they are willing to treat it as a marginal issue, and to see failures to provide access as understandable mistakes. This, she suggests, persistently locates disability as 'included as excludable'. She is particularly interested in how such an 'ordinary commonsense' is articulated through everyday conversation; and how it can be critically unravelled and analysed:

> Ordinary talk justifies the shape of daily life by relying on unexamined conceptions of disability. This provides an opportunity to explore how meanings of disability are generated. Taken-for-granted conceptions of disability are one way in which disabled people are viewed as irrelevant and absent. (Thus) the ordinary use of unexamined conceptions of disability reproduces the status-quo even as the material environment changes.
>
> (Titchkosky 2008: 1)

Titchkosky noticed that in her building, which did have accessible entry, there were both no accessible toilets and an inaccessible toilet with incorrect signage claiming it to be accessible for wheelchair users (Text Box 3.1):

> I was disturbed by the lack of access and, in the course of daily life, I talked to many people in the building about the lack of an accessible washroom and the obviously incorrect signage. My intent was not to make this concern into a research project, nor was I covertly collecting data. I was simply attempting to live with, understand, and fix a problem. In drawing attention to these barriers, I also was given a plethora of stories regarding the lack of accessible washrooms as well as stories explaining the

posting of inappropriate access signs. I was struck by the various stories-at-the-ready that are part of this workplace environment and likely part of every Western(ized) work place, judging by the absence of physically disabled people from all of my places of work.

(Titchkosky 2008: 2)

Text Box 3.1 Extract from Damon Rose, 'Is it time for a new wheelchair access icon?' BBC News *Ouch*, 22 September 2013. www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-ouch-24149316

Participants spray paint new accessible icons at the Diller Family Volunteer Day, 2 June 2013. Photography: Arianna Dines. http://bostondillerteenfellows.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/diller-family-volunteer-day.html

Seen on toilet doors, parking bays and practically every public building in the developed world, the International Symbol of Access has been in circulation since 1969. But now a group calling itself the Accessible Icon Project want to give the design a more twenty-first century, even paralympic, feel.

The new icon is based on the old one but shows the figure leaning forward, actively pushing the wheelchair – more David Weir than Ironside. The group's website is critical of the old icon: 'Its arms and legs are drawn like mechanical parts, its posture is unnaturally erect, and its entire look is one that makes the chair, not the person, important and visible.'

Artist Sara Hendron, a lecturer at Rhode Island School Of Design, USA, is one of those behind the project. She says the new icon started as

a piece of 'guerrilla art' on the campus of Gordon College near Boston, where she and collaborator Brian Glenney adapted existing access signs by overlaying a transparent sticker of a new active wheelchair user so old and new could both be seen . . .

The designers wanted to get people thinking. Hendron says the new symbol is 'a metaphor for self-direction and self determination', and believes the old one has become politically invisible. She thinks that other similar public information symbols are more dynamic than the classic wheelchair sign and are pictured actively engaging with the world.

There's another issue with the classic symbol, which is not necessarily addressed by the new version – it depicts a wheelchair user, but is also supposed to symbolize access for blindness, autism and many other non-wheelchair related impairments. In fact, although there's an estimated 750,000 wheelchair users in the UK, that's still less than 10% of the disability community.

Visual artist Caroline Cardus doesn't want the symbol to contain a wheelchair at all.

'If no other impairments are included in the sign then there's a subliminal message that if it's all right for wheelchair users then everyone else can just struggle along – and that's massively unhelpful.'

In 2004, Cardus created *The Way Ahead* [Figure 3.1], a travelling exhibition of thought-provoking disability road signs which was very popular and has only recently ended.

'I've thought for a very long time I would love to have a sign with something like a big "A" or whatever letter access starts with in your language, because then you could potentially have some visual shorthand which maybe has different levels . . . The A could perhaps have one dot for physical access and two dots for cognitive awareness,' she says. 'Something that basically says things are completely accessible or things are slightly accessible.'

See also The Accessible Icon Project: www.accessibleicon.org

As she goes on to say, the response from most people was to be genuinely puzzled that nothing was being done:

> All sorts of people are perplexed to find out about the inaccessibility and puzzled that those in authority do not consider the lack of a washroom meeting minimum accessibility standards to be a crisis for those working in the building. This perplexity, verging on incredulity, conditions what it means to work in this building. 'My Department requested those in charge to at least take down the misleading signs. But the signs are still there. What should we do?'
>
> (Titchkosky 2008: 53)

But at the same time, where there was awareness, it did not lead to anger or action. The fact that the lack of an accessible toilet would prevent many disabled people from easily using the building was just something that happened; the problem was not articulated around the unacceptability of disabled people being discriminated against, but as the (unfortunate) result of the many difficulties in achieving such laudable aims. Titchkosky calls these 'narratives of justification':

> Narratives of justification make it ordinary to disregard the absence of an accessible washroom as a noticeable barrier. The washroom is not missing; what is missing is any need to respond to such a barrier to participation. Justification, with its inherent lack of alarm, makes it reasonable not to notice the missing accessible washroom, and keeps the obviously incorrect signage from coming to collective attention. No one is responsible, because there is nothing to respond to – the absence has been made absent, and ordinarily so.
>
> (Titchkoksy 2008: 53)

This, she suggests, is the normal structuring of ordinary talk around disability; that it is adequate to seek, and then give a reason for, the lack of access; that this is enough; 'giving reasons is an acceptable response, and surprises no-one'. She thus shows us two key elements in the framing of disability and architecture generally. First, exclusion from a specific building is 'just one of those things', rather than a shocking or motivating event for most abled people. Second, there is no urgency in redeeming this situation. Since disabled people are often absent, only present in small numbers, or themselves responsible for enforcing their right to access, the abled do not need to face up to their own failure to perceive disabled people as legitimate participants in every building and public space. Here, there is a kind of slippage which would not be acceptable any more for other disadvantaged groups:

> Imagine preventing a woman or a black person from entering a public building where they had legitimate reason to be there (imagine even planning to ask them, or any other able-bodied person if they had a legitimate reason). But, since disabled people can get in some buildings some of the time, there is no need to be immediately horrified by the spatial apartheid this perpetuates or to make an increased effort to challenge such a situation right now. This despite the fact that disabled people have the least access, find it less easy to go somewhere else or to knit together complex journeys across space and time. Inclusion as excludability also means inclusion as assumed substitutability; that other spaces will do 'just as well'.
>
> (Titchkosky 2011: 143)

As I outlined in the previous chapter, similar processes happen within architectural design practice. Because accessibility is *already* assumed to be a difficult

addition to normal procedures, it seems too problematic to make much effort over, and any lack of achievement can be framed as a normal – even inevitable – response. This is because it is accessibility (and by extension disabled people themselves) that is seen as the problem, not the exclusion of some of the population from spaces and facilities available to everyone else.

In his book *Disability Theory* Tobin Siebers gives another example (2008: 30–2) of this 'including through excludability'; this time, around assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' design. It concerns the building of a 38-bed lodge high in the Appalachian Mountains in 2000, which was required to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) so as to be accessible to people with disabilities, a requirement that was resisted by 'normal' people. As Siebers writes:

> Its members ridiculed the idea that the building, which could be reached only by a super-rugged 4.6-mile trail, would ever be visited by wheelchair users, and the media tended to take their side.
>
> At this point a group from Northeast Passage, a program at the University of New Hampshire that works with people with disabilities, decided to make a visit to the Galehead hut. Jill Gravink, the director of Northeast Passage, led a group of three hikers in wheelchairs and two on crutches on a twelve-hour climb to the lodge, at the end of which they rolled happily up the ramp to its front door. A local television reporter on the scene asked why, if people in wheelchairs could drag themselves up the trail, they could not drag themselves up the steps into the hut, implying that the ramp was a waste of money. Gravink responded, 'Why bother putting steps on the hut at all? Why not drag yourself in through a window?'
>
> (Siebers 2008: 31)

As Siebers explains, for abled people climbing steps to an entrance is assumed to be so 'normal' as to be completely unnoticed and unworthy of comment, whilst the idea of climbing in through a window rather than using a door is 'obviously' absurd. This offers a perfect example of ordinary social and spatial practices and the surprise generated if breaching them is proposed. What is provided for the abled is taken for granted – 'nothing much' – whilst anything for disabled people is a problematic extra. As he goes on (and as outlined in Chapter 1):

> the built environment is full of technologies that make life easier for those people who possess the physical power to perform tasks without these technologies. Stairs, elevators, escalators, washing machines, leaf and snow blowers, eggbeaters, chainsaws, and other tools help to relax physical standards for performing certain tasks. These tools are nevertheless viewed as natural extensions of the body, and no one thinks twice about using them. The moment that individuals are marked as disabled or diseased, however, the expectation is that they will maintain the maximum standard

> of physical performance at every moment, and the technologies designed to make their life easier are viewed as expensive additions, unnecessary accommodations, and a burden on society.
>
> (Siebers 2008: 31)

Thus, we have two intertwined mechanisms for perpetuating the 'making concrete' of everyday social and spatial practices within architecture. First, ordinary talk makes it normal to not take accessibility seriously, to have shared and often repeated justificatory narratives that make it okay to exclude thinking about disabled people when designing. Simultaneously, the normal elements of design – doors, stairs, corridors, tables, surfaces – just 'naturally' enable the abled and fail to 'fit' (disable) more diverse bodies. While the usual characteristics of these elements are unnoticed as 'nothing much', they may become exposed to view to the abled when they are disrupted by an unexpected alteration in what is 'ordinary', for example by uneven and non-standard treads and risers on a set of stairs, or doors that open out into a corridor rather than inwards, into a room. Of course such elements do change (because of technological innovations and/or manufacturing processes and/or regulatory reasons and/or shifting consumer preferences). So, for example in the UK, standard kitchen units are now 600mm rather than 500mm wide. And part of an architect's job is to actively re-design these elements, as well as their relationships to each other and to space and form. Why then, does re-design which supports diverse bodies not form a normal part of what architects do?

Why don't architects just . . .

- **think about glare, bouncing sound, stuffy rooms – these can make the built environment uncomfortable for most and unusable for many**
- **use high colour contrast for steps or any raised areas as a standard practice**
- **consider how we engage with space and the built environment on a psychological level**
- **stop placing pedal bins in disabled toilets? Am I meant to do a wheelie to get my hand towel into the bin?**
- **explore the simple effect of making doors wider as a standard – 'could' lead to massive impact across the board**
- **design toilet door locks that are big enough to see from a distance, and use big enjoyable graphics to show if the cubicle is vacant or not**

(Responses to a post on Disability Arts Online (DAO) September 2013, www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk)

Why is dis/ability not seen as providing creative potential in these acts of making architectural forms, spaces and components differently, alongside and interwoven with the other variables of designing? I am already suggesting that in the simultaneous processes of (re-)producing ordinary social and spatial practices and of not noticing these practices, architects, like many others, fail to see dis/ability except *sometimes* and to only include it as excludable. But to this must be added the issue of architecture's own internal discourses, the diverse ways the profession approaches the design of buildings and the extent to which dis/ability 'intrudes'. Whilst I have dealt briefly with the modernist stereotypes of the universal user in the last chapter, and will explore in some detail a few specific architectural theories and practices in the next section, here it is important to outline what is generally 'storyable' in architectural discourses about ordinary social and spatial practices. Architecture, after all, is centrally about making new stories, shifting existing ideas, attitudes and practices, generating new kinds of form, and offering up different social and spatial arrangements. But it turns out that only certain alternative 'non-normal' narratives are allowable, and that others – for example, inclusive design – are excluded. How, then, does this come to be the case?

Dis/educating architects

Titchkosky calls learning to perpetuate everyday social and spatial practices without noticing 'dis-education':

> This dis-education teaches that the category of legitimate participant does not [for example] include wheelchair users. The dis-education of the sensorium [the culturally specific ways our senses are hierarchically ordered] includes a way to sense and make sensible the legitimate participants with their legitimated 'normal' accommodation expenses: lighting, chairs, technology, privacy, directional signs, pleasing eye-scapes and, of course, a place to pee. Legitimated participants rarely confront access as a question. They can take for granted the whole massive infrastructure of and for ableist consumption and use, which the sensorium has educated them (us) to consider normal and even natural.
>
> (Titchkoksy 2008: 50)

As I have already noted, architectural education and practice prides itself on its social commitment and duty of care. Whilst this issue will be dealt with in greater depth in the following chapters, here I want to briefly explore what happens to such a social commitment when architectural students are introduced to these potentially parallel universes; that is, what ends up taking precedence through the processes of architectural education. A head of a School of Architecture (that at the time was rightly well-known for its engagement with social issues) was asked about how disability was being taught at his institution, and replied as follows:

> [O]ne cannot cover all aspects of the design of the built environment, but one can set up an ethos in which issues such as inclusion, access, autism, the vernacular, safety (to name just a few of the recent surveys) are inculcated as values to be taken seriously. I would say, but then maybe I would, that this is the ethos (here). We explicitly refer to the user as a core part of our focus, and in this see the user as diverse (including issues of disability). Our 'mission' is specifically about the social and environmental responsibility of the architect. I argue that the development of this ethos and responsibility then can be applied to more specialist areas.
>
> (personal email exchange, 28 September 2007)

Without doubt, many people within architectural education and practice would agree with this response, and see it as perfectly acceptable. Yet simultaneously incorporating disability as one among many important inclusions (users), and then separating it out as something 'specialist' which can be applied later, repeats what has already been critiqued here; that is, it is one of the justificatory narratives through which disabled people disappear, again included as excludable. For architects and design educators, meeting the 'needs' of the disabled can seem to be just another pressure on what is already a highly complex job, with many, often conflicting, stakeholder demands. I know that I have done this myself in my own architectural and interiors teaching, discussing disability in a general way, but not always allowing it to 'intrude' on students' 'more important' learning about how to design material space. In architecture, in addition, the problem of both describing and generalizing users is often an implicit rather than explicit concern. In architectural education students and staff may base their ideas on what they already know (themselves and their peers) or on stereotypical notions of others (disabled = wheelchair) or on an artificially created 'performative' figure (the artist or other creative/eccentric figure) as a deliberately poetic abstraction. It is then assumed that through the practice of repeated design exercises, both whilst studying and in employment, students will learn to listen to their clients and users, and to interpret and translate their various and diverse articulations into built form.

> **The normative model for first year is to isolate the students from reality in order to allow them 'space to fly'. Students are brought via design briefs to the edges of architecture (design a space for a juggler) in the hope that this 'stretching' will unleash their creative potential.**
>
> (Morrow *et al.* 2004: 3)

In fact, research shows that architectural students do *not* learn to engage with dis/ability or occupancy more generally; rather they focus on working out what their tutors want, and quickly imbibe the unspoken assumptions that

strong design concepts and methods 'win out' over usability or practicalities. It is the parallel universe of internal architectural discourse that takes priority in shaping their ideas and practices. Two studies, reviewed by Strickfaden *et al.*, illustrate just how embedded this disconnect is in architectural education, moving students away from dis/ability as part of a critical, theoretically informed analysis of occupancy:

> The first study [Strickfaden and Heylighen 2009] involves observation *in situ* of two groups of senior design students, who are focusing on user-centred design principles while designing: 12 third-year BSc students in the UK, and eight MDes students in Canada. Each group is observed from the onset to the completion of one design project. The findings of this study indicate that other people are characterised and defined so generically that they are devoid of gender and age, let alone more specific attributes such as (dis)abilities. Surprisingly across the two groups the students never demonstrate an intimate knowledge of other people in general, nor do they show any understanding of the variances in people's preferences and needs. Many participants even admit explicitly to working from their memory of an age group or a certain experience with the kind of artefact they are designing. Even worse is that the students do not stop to question or even consider that they may be mirroring their own assumptions and creating generalisations about people. The central finding of this work is that students are driven predominantly by what they perceive as their teachers' needs (the major stakeholders in their projects), which seems to impair their ability to perceive other people beyond a superficial level.
>
> (Strickfaden *et al.* 2009: 449)

The other study was of a group specifically interested in inclusive design (three students trained in architecture and one trained in sociology, all post-graduates working towards a PhD degree with various interests in disability studies). These students were collaborating on the re-design of an inclusive office space in a historical building, supported by several books on design, a visual image bank of projects (including inclusive design examples) and a consultant disabled user/expert to provide advice. However, as the researchers note:

> even with heightened awareness towards disabilities, these students consistently default to their own perceptual frameworks and personal capital. Interestingly the sociology student acts as the conscience of the group by interjecting questions and persuasive reminders of how a space may be perceived, interpreted and experienced by other people. Of even more interest is the fact that the students do not investigate the majority of provided resources, i.e., one of four of the students looks through all books, two of four glance through some, none of them looks at the image bank, and none of them consults the user/expert.
>
> (Strickfaden *et al.* 2009: 449)

The authors suggest that the problem lies in designing for an 'absent audience', rather than with participating users, and looks for techniques to enable students to 'empathize' more with diverse users in their absence.[4] Here, though I have already suggested that user participation has only limited value, as it leads to disabled and other disadvantaged groups being included only *sometimes*, and argued that this persistent difficulty instead lies in the commonsense frameworks through which users are conceptualized more generally within architecture. As the authors show, what the students reveal is, first, that other people remain 'positioned at a distance and untouchable – simply "someone" or "*anyone*" else' (Strickfaden and Heylighen 2009: 449, my italics), and second, that they default to their designer-centred approach, as a reflection of how they have been trained, 'suggesting that people from outside are potentially marginalized or even negated' (p. 450).

Thus, what is 'storyable' within normal social and spatial practices is here perpetuated. When that ordinary commonsense intersects with architectural education, then not only does 'anyone' fail to be critically explored (either as a concept or a complex reality), but the unnoticed and unthought-about framings of 'anyone' within design discourse become *the* means through which occupancy gets translated into material space and artefacts. This suggests – following Titchkosky – that we need to urgently begin becoming critically self-aware of designers' own justificatory narratives so as to unpick their effects across both 'normal' and architectural discourses and practices.

Opening up dis/ordinary social and spatial practices

Here, I have given some examples of how thinking about dis/ability can begin to undermine the conventions of ordinary social and spatial practices. I have stressed how important it is to challenge assumptions that disability is an unfortunate breach of 'normal' life but one that does not require action on the part of the abled. I have begun to open up for critical investigation the problematic and non-coherent intersections between everyday social and spatial practices and architecture's own knowledge base and ways of working. Here, finally, I want to show how starting from dis/ability can help reveal the hidden logic behind everyday social and spatial practices, not because it breaches 'norms' but because it exposes, resists and alters the 'ordinary':

> I am in the East Room at Tate Modern in London for a public lecture about disability arts. It is rectilinear, monochrome, modern, minimal with floor to ceiling glazing on three sides, currently curtained, with an even-

4 Ann Heylighen has received a European Research Council (ESC) Proof-of-Concept Grant for her proposal 'Rent-a-Spatialist' which aims to develop the work outlined here, so that she and her team can investigate whether and how disabled people's experiences can impact on architectural education in Belgium. The research runs from November 2013 to October 2014: www.asro.kuleuven.be/aida/index.php?ref=project.

4 Destabilizing architecture?

In the 1970s and 1980s Rem Koolhaas was one of a large number of architects internationally who set about challenging the underlying assumptions of previous modernist architectural practices. In his book *Delirious New York* (originally published in 1978) he explored an 'alternative modernism' (both real and fictionalized) centred on an architecture of desire rather than on a universal, functional user, and where – taking the standard New York block as an exemplar – architectural form could be allowed to be a simple 'container' in which, nonetheless, unexpected and even outrageous human interactions could be housed (Text Box 4.1).

Text Box 4.1 Rem Koolhaas: excerpt from 'Definitive Instability: The Downtown Athletic Club' in *Delirious New York: A Retrospective Manifesto for Manhattan*, 1994 edition, New York: Monacelli Press, p. 155

The lowest floors are equipped for relatively conventional athletic pursuits: squash and handball courts, poolrooms, etc., all sandwiched between locker rooms. But then ascent through the upper layers of the structure – with its implied approximation of a theoretical 'peak' condition – leads through territories never before tread upon by man.

Emerging from the elevator on the ninth floor, the visitor finds himself in a dark vestibule that leads directly into a locker room that occupies the center of the platform, where there is no daylight. There he undresses, puts on boxing gloves and enters an adjoining space equipped with a multitude of punching bags (occasionally he may even confront a human opponent).

On the southern side, the same locker room is also serviced by an oyster bar with a view over the Hudson River. *Eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the nth floor* – such is the 'plot' of the ninth story, or, the *20th century in action*.

> In a further escalation, the tenth floor is devoted to preventive medicine. On one side of a lavish dressing lounge an array of body manipulation facilities is arranged around a Turkish bath: sections for massage and rubbing, an eight-bed station for artificial sunbathing, a ten-bed resting area. On the south face, six barbers are concerned with the mysteries of masculine beauty and how to bring it out. But the southwest corner of the floor is the most explicitly medical: a special facility that can treat five patients at the same time. A doctor here is in charge of the process of '*Colonic Irrigation*': the insertion into the human intestines of synthetic bacterial cultures that rejuvenate man by improving his metabolism.

Since then, through both projects and writings, and together with his practice the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Koolhaas has been influential in offering strategies and tactics that can move design beyond a simplistic version of modernist design methods, shaped by functionalism and a belief in universal, comprehensive and coherent solutions. So what are these approaches and how can they be interrogated productively through dis/ability?

Destabilizing architecture

One of the crucial factors of Koolhaas's challenge to the modernist architectural ideal is to show just how relatively powerless architects are; how difficult, partial and uneven the relationship between theory and practice, ideas and realization is. As he writes:

> Architecture is a hazardous mixture of omnipotence and impotence. Ostensibly involved in 'shaping' the world, for their thoughts to be mobilised architects depend on the provocations of others – clients, individual or institutional. Therefore, incoherence, or more precisely, randomness, is the underlying structure of all architects' careers: they are confronted with an arbitrary sequence of demands, with parameters they did not establish, in countries they hardly know, about issues they are only dimly aware of, expected to deal with problems that have proved intractable to brains vastly superior to their own. Architecture is by definition a *chaotic adventure*.
>
> (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: xix)

Since this chaos and randomness of achievement is inherent in the architectural process, Koolhaas wants his fellow practitioners to accept it, to admit to their lack of God-like control, and to explore ways of starting from this resigned self-knowledge, most immediately in no longer attempting to appear neutral and objective in their rationales for building projects. The book

S, M, L, XL (1995), which is in fact more of a manifesto, begins with a series of images detailing in diagrammatic form (overlaid on photographs of the practice's dishevelled design office) staffing, expenditure and global reach. The rest of the volume combines an alphabetically organized vertical band of relatively randomized keywords and their definitions, together with a wide variety of graphic layouts combining images and text. Thus the layout of the book itself reflects Koolhaas's belief that neither overall coherence nor connective tissue exist, that incomplete and/or contradictory actions are inherent in how we think, work and inhabit the world. This is also expressed in how he writes – as a series of stories that attempt to reveal deeper truths than theoretical polemics, factual histories or descriptions of reality; here he is operating not at the level of explicit argument and explanation but in fable and personal interpretation; not a formally coherent grand narrative but a series of resonant fragments, expressed through filmic, graphic and magazine type formats (Figure 4.1).

If architectural narratives (both about themselves and about their projects) are inherently unstable and ambiguous, so too is the actual designing of architectural space. The unachievable, if assumed, direct and transparent

Figure 4.1 Cover illustration to *Content* magazine, Rem Koolhaas, 2004, Cologne: Taschen. Photography: Jos Boys.

correlations between a building's users, function, construction and internal and external appearance in modernist ideology are here re-framed through both a re-reading of modernism's alternative histories and through an explicit political (in the widest sense) engagement with contemporary global architectural and societal contexts. For Koolhaas, this leads to at least two threads, which appear in different ways in various projects. The first is, as with many of his contemporaries such as Bernard Tschumi,[1] to understand design as a form of narrative and sequencing rather than functional plan-making:

> I think the professions of scriptwriting and architecture are very close; for both you have to consider a plot, you have to develop episodes and you have to create a kind of montage that makes it interesting, and a sequence that makes the circulation or the paths or the experience of a building interesting, and gives it a certain suspense.
>
> (Heidingfelder and Tesch 2008)

Second, in envisioning occupancies as event rather than function based, Koolhaas increasingly comes to the view that individuals make their own purposes in the buildings they occupy in ways that cannot be delineated into neat patterns in plan or section. And as buildings get bigger, as these dynamic patterns become more various and complex, they cease to be something that architects can even think about organizing or controlling spatially. As he says:

> I am not interested in scripting exhaustively all the reactions there are . . . design, build, explain – [I am] more and more interested in withdrawing from that situation. . . . I am basically filled with ambiguity about it.
>
> (Heidingfelder and Tesch 2008)

In OMA's more recent works this is most deliberately expressed through a separation out of the compositional manipulations of form, which are treated very much abstractly and 'architecturally' (as 'the box'), and the more free-form opening up of the spaces within and around to not just their supposed activities but to other opportunities, as yet unknown. As Dutton and Mann put it:

> OMA designs 'large envelopes' unprogrammed by differentiated activities. Not simply a romantic pluralist, Koolhaas places this random freedom for activities within an exaggeratedly rigid, inhuman, non-referential

1 Koolhaas is just one of a whole generation of architects such as Bernard Tschumi and Zaha Hadid, who have challenged architectural modernism in innovative and important ways. Koolhaas, in turn, has influenced a considerable number of younger architects, such as Winy Maas of the Dutch firm MVRDV and Bjarke Ingels of the Copenhagen-based BIG, who both worked for him.

> form, something meaningless in which the meanings of activities will evolve.
>
> (Dutton and Mann 1996: 291)

In this OMA deliberately use *different* design methods for creating the overall solidity of the form and structure, and for orchestrating dynamic and relational patterns of occupation. The first works at the level of ideas from 'within' the discipline's own history and theory, by being generated from, commenting on and responding to previous buildings or approaches. The second is based on a belief that occupation is too various and dynamic to be coherently inscribed into a new designed space, but that the design of that space does come from the detailed specifics of a particular situation. Koolhaas outlines this as follows:

> If there is a method to this work, it is a method of systematic *idealisation* – a systematic awareness of what exists, a bombardment of speculation that invests even the most mediocre aspects with retroactive conceptual and ideological charge . . .
>
> The mirror image of this action is the most clinical inventory of the actual conditions of each site, no matter how uninspiring, the most calculating exploitation of its objective potential.
>
> (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: 208, emphasis in original)

This 'clinical' inventory, however, then becomes the basis for what Dunham-Jones (2013) calls 'programmatic instability in order to counteract architectural rigidity'; that is, a means to generate unexpected rather than normative responses. For non-architects, this is further complicated by a third, overlaying, process because Koolhaas and OMA then enjoy deliberately 'playing' with the tensions created by both this separation and the differences between 'formal' and 'functional' procedures. The inter-relationships of these two methods becomes itself a way of expressing architecturally the central idea of ambiguity – of architecture as working at the intersections between the mutually constitutive but separate, contradictory and non-coherent realms of representation and of events, social good and commercial gain. Simultaneously, the potential for unexpected connections and displacements becomes a means to make deliberately transgressive comments about conventional and 'normal' planning and aesthetics, and about the bigger contradictions of an exploding capitalist world, a point to which I will return.

An early design method derived from such thinking was 'cross-programming' (again clearly influenced by the *Delirious New York* work), introducing unexpected functions in room programmes, such as running tracks in skyscrapers. More recently, Koolhaas (unsuccessfully) proposed the inclusion of hospital units for the homeless in the 2003 Seattle Public Library project. This is perhaps the key mechanism through which, at a conceptual level, Koolhaas aims 'to restore a kind of honesty and clarity to the relationship between architecture and public' (Koolhaas and Mau 1995: xix) both in text and designed form. He

starts from some of the conventional social and spatial binary divisions between, for example, marginal/important, destroyed/rebuilt, realism/utopianism, permanence/instability, large-scale urban/small-scale individual, western/non-western, relativity/essence and absence/presence. He then brings what are often oppositional concepts back into deliberate and/or unexpected formal and spatial juxtaposition. The resulting intersections remain contradictory and entangled, because – unlike modernism – bringing different ideas together is here not about finding an underlying coherence, but about both expressing and enjoying ambiguity. Such unexpected surprises more often occur, not so much at the level of programme, but as a means of making 'non-normal' events within a building; for example, making the goods vehicle delivery road a visible backdrop to the stage of the lecture hall at the Kunsthal in Rotterdam (Figure 4.2).

The Villa at Bordeaux

The husband explained . . .: 'Contrary to what you might expect, I do not want a simple house. I want a complicated house because it will determine my world.'

(http://storiesofhouses.blogspot.co.uk)

Figure 4.2 Interior of main lecture theatre, Kunsthal Rotterdam by OMA, completed 1992. Photography: Marianne (as part of Wiki Loves Art/NL project) via Wikipedia Creative Commons.

What, then, does such a design attitude and method end up feeling and looking like? Whilst the Villa at Bordeaux in France, begun in 1994, is a small single family house rather than a large corporate or governmental building, we can use it to explore how these ideas are played out in practice, in one specific case. It is one of OMA's most famous projects, built on an isolated countryside plateau for a client who used a wheelchair, and for his family. Architecturally this is a seminal building for contemporary architects, equivalent to the great modernist examples of Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1929) and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House (1951), to both of which it makes explicit reference, generating its language of form and structure through a dialogue with these projects. This is achieved by OMA through a series of games and reversals, acknowledging and then subverting modernist architectural assumptions. For example, the building is divided into three horizontal layers (in good modernist fashion). But the top floor, which contains the bedrooms, refuses to respond to the panoramic views (the house overlooks the Garonne river) through the conventionally contextual and modernist technique of large windows and light spaces. Instead this top floor is a deliberately heavy concrete 'bunker' with only slits for windows; and the whole 'weight' of it seems to challenge any 'normal' structural logic (with a shape which 'upends' the implied structural coherence of a typical modernist post and beam structure). The openings in this floating box *do* have a clearly stated contextual logic but one that sets a tension between what would architecturally be seen as an overly heavy form and its internal requirements. As Jacques Lucan writes:

> Rem Koolhaas has opted for a myriad of views that require the eye to occupy a series of precise points in space at the summit of the virtual visual cones generated by the portholes that are perforated in the thick shell of reinforced concrete. Instead of a sweeping and unimpeded view of the horizon, the eye has a choppy vision, never perceiving more than the sum of miniature pictures.
>
> (Koolhaas 1998: 19)

The next layer down, the main living floor, which would 'normally' be expressed and celebrated by modernist architects, is here 'invisible', non-articulated – merely the slot of space between top and bottom which is half inside and half outside. Finally, the lowest level is 'cave-like', what Koolhaas calls 'a series of caverns carved out from the hill for the most intimate life of the family' (Koolhaas 1998: 21). If Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye is – conceptually – a coherent and flowing journey upwards from the ground to the sky, then the Villa at Bordeaux instead deliberately offers visual and compositional mismatches around ideas of transparency and solidity, absence and presence (Figure 4.3).

The compositional device that intersects these more architectural gestures with the realities of everyday occupancies is the 3-metre by 3.5-metre vertical moving floor plate central to the plan, which is both a lift and a 'room' for the

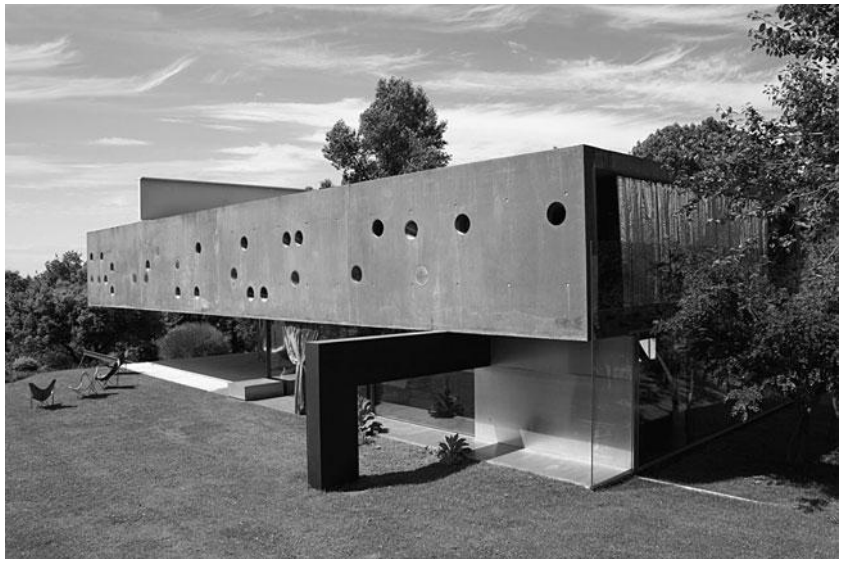

Figure 4.3 Exterior view, OMA, Villa at Bordeaux, France (1998). Photograph courtesy of *Living Architectures*, www.living-architectures.com/Koolhaas_houselife.php

wheelchair-using client. Marked by a wall that integrates all three layers (and contains everything the owner might need: books, wine, office, etc.) the lift platform acts as a resonant metaphor, of the centrality and importance of the owner to the activities of the house. It expresses a 'void' when he is absent on another floor, and architectural form as a continually transitional process between occupation and space, by moving freely between realms 'changing plan and performance' (Koolhaas 1998: 62). Architecturally, this is a play with and against Le Corbusier's use of the ramp at Villa Savoye as a unifying and dynamic element throughout the building. But the gesture is taken even further; by juxtaposing a smooth and easy flow of movement for the wheelchair user with deliberately awkward and challenging elements for the abled participants in the house, most notably a tightly spiralling staircase and a series of difficult-to-see glass edges and unprotected holes in the floor. In the film of the building, *Koolhaas Houselife* (Bêka and Lemoine 2013) the cleaner memorably hauls a vacuum cleaner up the spiral staircase (Figure 4.4). Whilst the disabled man glides friction-free up through the space – and makes that space his by his very arrival – the abled must watch their step and be constantly aware of barriers to easy progress. As one of his colleagues says wryly and only half-jokingly in the film *A Kind of Architect*:

> [This is an] extremely theatrical if not filmic architecture. . . . Breaks are built in, resulting in moments of suspense and irritation, the ground gets

Figure 4.4 Video still from *Koolhaas Houselife* (Bêka and Lemoine 2008) featuring Guadalupe Acedo, the housekeeper, as she looks after the house. Available from www.living-architectures.com/Koolhaas_houselife.php

> swept from under your feet, you lose your footing. A critic once wrote: you rarely leave a building by Koolhaas without bruises.
>
> (Heidingfelder and Tesch 2008)

How then does a project like this, and the theoretical framework through which it has been developed, help us think more critically and creatively about dis/ability and architecture? First, what has been important about the work of architects of both this generation, and those since, is that they have challenged and re-thought many of the assumptions of architectural modernism built on a reductive image of human occupation and its representation in built form. Koolhaas and OMA, by decisively separating out aesthetic and compositional concerns from programmatical ones, as well as by admitting to the partiality of what architects can do in social terms, have opened the way for much more complex and nuanced understandings of relationships between people and built space. At the same time, rather than designing for a mechanical idea of a universal 'user', Koolhaas builds in some idea of the unfixability of human needs, desires and preferences; and of the uncontrollability of events. If his early work around desire, which described detailed, embodied encounters – as in the

New York Downtown Athletic Club – became less relevant to him as building projects got bigger and bigger, it has still enabled the imagining of occupancy as rich and complex.

In addition, Koolhaas and OMA have been at the forefront of radical shifts in how architects think and talk about what they do, and in extending our architectural vocabularies in creative and thought-provoking ways; particularly through their insistence on a conscious discrepancy between the formally designed 'box' – 'the search for form' as a conscious patterning of solid and void – and its contents, 'the process of fitting programme into this form' (Koolhaas 1999: 108). In OMA's buildings the resulting intersections are often clearly visible in the built project's formal, architectural manipulations; partly because Koolhaas deliberately does not attempt to disguise the monotony of many repetitive block-type organizational forms, and partly because his focus on manipulating the building-as-box tends to use the most obviously cinematic components – patterns of movement – as both a formal and a programmatic element, often seeming to literally carve through the other spaces. This has tended to make circulation a kind of 3-D cutting through of the box that, almost accidentally, has generated many buildings that treat floor surfaces as planes and levels, where ramps function as hinges, and floors warp, opening the way to later generations of architects to integrate sloping floors and ramps into their work as a matter of course, and as integral to conceptual thinking, rather than as a specialist, practical and added-on 'disabled' element. I will return to the relevance of this explicit playing with levels in Chapter 5.

At the same time, though, Koolhaas and OMA's work raises big questions about *how* architectural design is or should be generated. This is as much about what gets left out and remains invisible to debate, as what is explicitly said. Next, then, I want to explore how the 'peopling' of architecture in general, and dis/ability in particular, becomes marginalized or invisible in architectural approaches like this.

> **The Bordeaux House engages architectural discourse in a way that conventional accessible buildings do not.**
>
> (Fitzsimons 2012: 9)

Falling down the gaps between composition and programme

Many aspects of Koolhaas's and OMA's development programme in the case-by-case specificity of each project can actually be quite conventional, and similar to architectural practices more generally. For example, almost all of his houses make a programmatic split between spaces for adults and those for children. And, as with many other architects, possible propositions are explored through

Criticality through participation

I have already outlined some of the potential difficulties with participatory design projects, both in how relationships between 'users' and 'designers' can fail to be critically reframed, and because – in focusing only on case-by-case examples – disability becomes a special (and difficult) category that only needs to be dealt with *sometimes*. In architectural education, such projects tend to be about a building *for* disabled people, and, as outlined in Chapter 3, fail to challenge the much stronger demands on students to conceptualize their work primarily through architectural concerns with formal, spatial and aesthetic manipulations. In the *Making Discursive Spaces* project at the University of Brighton (Boys 2007, 2008) we attempted to sidestep these problems by offering a more general design project (artists' studios) and by employing a number of disabled artists as tutors (Figure 7.4).[1] As we wrote at the time:

> Bringing together Deaf and disabled artists with interior architecture students in a collaborative space both enables richer descriptions of material space and disability than traditionally discussed and opens up interpretations of the built environment from different 'positions' to creative and constructive review. We hoped this would produce more creative

Figure 7.4 Interior Architecture student tutorials, *Making Discursive Spaces* project, University of Brighton, UK, 2007. http://www.discursivespaces.co.uk

1 This interior architecture studio, taught with Theresa Hoskyns, worked with disabled artists Rachel Gadsden, Noëmi Lakmaier, Caroline Cardus, Miles Thomas, Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq, Sarah Pickthall and Damian Toal. Student participants were Kerry Alford, Charlotte Brisley, Matt Everest, Laia Martin Marqueda, Lettie McCall, Alex Paduano, Rohini Pophale, Dominie Shelley, Vasiliki Stylianou, Ellie Taplin, and Rebecca Whythe.

> complexity, and therefore deeper levels of understanding so as to enrich design quality, not just for Deaf and disabled people but for everyone.
>
> (Boys 2007)

But, as with the research already discussed, the project was only partially successful, lacking critical purchase on the already existing complex relationships between architectural education as a practice, and the contradictory 'location' of accessibility and inclusive design within it. Whilst the collaboration increased design students' awareness of their own bodies, and of differences between bodies, it did not challenge their already existing assumptions about what makes 'good' design and how to go about it (that is, by starting from a concept and then moving into increasing detail). Within this framework, disability continued to be disconnected from the parallel universe of 'proper' architecture. There was therefore what one participant called 'a problem in translation'; that many second-year undergraduate students struggled with finding ways of translating their awareness and feelings about the qualities of space – and about these new ways of thinking disability – into design. They could recognize the artists' different insights but had very few tools to take these forward into a design method or realization. In addition, students were all too aware that this element of the project was not officially assessed; and therefore felt insecure or split about whether to engage completely with the artists, or to rely more on what they conventionally understood as a design project. A small minority of other tutors were also not supportive of incorporating disability issues into the design studio, which made students confused about how they should respond. This added extra layers of complexity – not just about disability and design but also about educational experiences and levels, about design education frameworks and about what risks students felt they could take during their studies. But if this was our own evaluation from the project, an external critic was much more scathing:

> Ah, but at the end of the day . . . you're still in control as the one with the design expertise . . . so what are you really risking? Are you prepared to risk the explosion of the hegemony of standards and aesthetics in the design industries if that's what it takes to fully liberate disabled people from their imposed silence? Wouldn't it be interesting to stretch this to examining whether the interior design and architectural fields' inherent structures are even capable of apprehending the shattering impact of a completely Other set of knowledges . . .?
>
> (Anonymous external reviewer comment 2008)

Another approach was Squarinthecircle?, a public arts programme initiated by the Disability Arts development agency Dada-South with Diablo Arts, in partnership with the University of Portsmouth, St George's Beneficial School, the Portsea community and disabled artists. The project involved architecture students, other local young people, the Portsmouth Disability Forum,

local disabled artists and the University estates team. It included workshops by Signdance Collective with architectural students and with schoolchildren; and the commissioning of a sculpture from disabled artist Tony Heaton (Figure 7.5). The aim of the project was to develop a dialogue with local groups who can often feel excluded from plans about their own built environment. The project allowed them to contribute to new developments being proposed by the University.

The University of Portsmouth also employs Jon Adams, an artist with dyslexia and Asperger's syndrome, as a Research Fellow, to work with students on projects, including architecture students. Again, raising awareness of disability, and opening up students to a different way of looking, has been a central intention (www.disabilityartsonline.org.uk/Jon-Adams).

Minding the gaps

The examples of alternative mapping introduced here have, to varying degrees, started from disability as a means of making explicit the kinds of work involved in both everyday living, and in order to help us better understand how 'normal' social and spatial practices come to be unconsciously perpetuated, and can be critically and creatively exposed. But I have also argued that in order to do disability differently, we need to critically map where and how architecture as a profession, practice and product continues to both re-produce 'normal'

Figure 7.5 Tony Heaton, Squarinthecircle? Sculpture, commissioned by the Arts Council and sited at the University of Portsmouth. Photography: Chris Smart. www.tonyheaton.co.uk/squareinthecircle.htm