

AHRA book

INVISIBILITY WORK? How starting from dis/ability challenges normative social, spatial and material practices

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores how thinking about dis/ability (disability and ability) opens up what counts as work to critical and creative investigation. It will examine three, interconnected, notions of work; the often unnoticed – and differential - work involved in negotiating our built surroundings: the commonsense ‘ordinary’ work of making and re-making particular social, spatial and material practices through our everyday attitudes, talk and actions: and the work of perpetuating and/or contesting unequal and normative practices through architectural, artistic, political and personal interventions.

These types of work are not new to feminism, which also aims to expose the invisible and/or marginalised work around gender, and to develop creative and critical forms of contestation. The key argument here though, is about taking notice of how and when feminism – along with cultural theory more generally – can assume that work to be the work of only particular kinds of bodies, ones that are inherently mobile, rational and autonomous. The privilege of being able-bodied (or white or middle class) becomes part of what is unnoticed and unspoken about, with disability as a concept, and disabled people as a constituency left to disappear down the gaps. In response, I will suggest that starting from dis/ability has a huge amount to offer across our everyday, professional and academic thinking about, and actions in, the world; and to show the essential relevance of the work of disability studies scholars and disabled artists and activists to contemporary architectural feminisms.

Introduction

The research outlined here expanded exponentially from a simple question: why is disability not critically examined, like gender, sexuality or race in architecture? Why has disability somehow remained consistently stuck in a non-historical and atheoretical relationship to building design theories and practices? It is invisible in both avant-garde and mainstream architectural theories and discourses, just as it is a persistent absence in critical and cultural theory more generally¹. Within the discipline

of architecture disability remains predominantly framed by design guidance and building regulations on the one hand, and by a 'common sense' language of accessibility and inclusive/universal design on the other. Neither of these approaches is wrong; but they act to locate disability as a concept, and disabled people as a constituency as completely separate from social or cultural politics. This illustrates just how deeply disability remains widely avoided, compared to other disadvantaged identities. Unlike gender, sexuality and race – and the feminist, queer, critical race and post-colonial studies that underpin associated scholarship and debate – it seems we assume 'disability' to be unable to bring any kind of criticality or creativity to architecture.

So, how then, does feminism and architecture in its already diverse variations and positions currently take notice of disability? Because a similar question has to be asked – why does feminism within architecture and the built environment not often pay attention to disability, even whilst it is deeply concerned with social justice and inclusion? This is *not* because there is no theory, critique or activism to engage with. Second wave western/global north feminism from the 1970s and 80s included many disabled feminist theorists and activists who explored interconnections between and across gender and disabled identities, and between personal narratives of impairment and social analyses of disability². There has also been a strongly emerging seam of theoretical and critical thought in disability studies – sometimes explicitly feminist, often integrative across and between identities - and with much that examines accessibility, inclusion and built space³. But this fantastically rich and provocative work has had almost no impact on architectural and related discourses, or on architectural feminisms, a huge gap for the subject⁴.

Here, I want to outline some ways in which disability studies, disability arts practice and disability activism are directly relevant and crucial to our understandings of how built space works; and to better understanding how we can unravel the everyday social, spatial and material practices through which space is made and re-made (as well as challenged and contested) as 'normal'. As many disability studies scholars have noted, 'centralizing dis/ability as a major concept of agency (...) disrupts, questions and alters the common modes of spatial ordering'⁵. To do this the chapter will be framed around exploring in turn three, inter-connected, notions of work. This is first, the often unnoticed – and differential - work involved in negotiating our built surroundings: paying attention to how this operates *relationally* at the intersections of different kinds of bodies, minds, and material space. Second, it is about the

commonsense 'ordinary' work of making and re-making particular social, spatial and material practices through our everyday attitudes, talk and actions. That is, how do particular kinds of 'normal' become routinised and so ordinary as to be invisible? Finally I will explore the work of perpetuating and/or contesting unequal and normative practices through architectural, artistic, political and personal interventions.

Throughout I will focus on how architecture-related practices can act to 'forget' the complexity of bodies, and to favour particular kinds of bodies over others. And I will argue that this requires investigating both *what* bodies matter⁶ and what matters *about* bodies in the attitudes and approaches that frame both 'normal' architectural practices, and feminist engagements with them. This means a focus on how the 'ordinary' routines across social, design, educative, research and professional trajectories are perpetuated and/or contested. As Sacks argues, doing being ordinary takes effort. Not noticing things and making assumptions is an ongoing, socially achieved activity. Here I will call this the *invisibility work* that is undertaken by non-disabled people. This is because it concerns both the amount of unnoticed effort that goes into making disability as a concept and disabled people as a constituency invisible; and the very invisibility of abled-ness that allows 'normal' bodies to be seen as nothing much, as not worth talking about. This covers, for instance, the work of avoiding discomfort (of privileging the non-disabled person 'not knowing what to do' when meeting a disabled person over actually seeing that person); of persistently naming disabled peoples' lives in particular ways (as tragic, pitiful, and/or inspiring); of simplistically perpetuating a binary opposition between disability and able-bodiedness, so as to give only the latter agency and value; of seeing disabled people as separate and as a 'problem' for architectural design, that can be left to design guidance and legal requirements; and of assuming thoughtlessly (that is, without thought) that design theories and methods do not need to critically or creatively engage with their own normativity.

Unencumbered subjects 'versus' unruly bodies

Central to what I am arguing here is that the non-disabled body can ignore its own embodiment. In negotiating built space with ease, it can forget the vulnerabilities of corporeality (just as, within a masculinist and class society it can 'forget' the differential and inequitable effects of gender, sexuality, race or poverty). As Titchkosky writes:

language recommends that we conceive of the able-body as something that

just comes along 'naturally' as people go about their daily existence. People just jump into the shower, run to the store, see what others mean while keeping an eye on the kids, or skipping from office to office and, having run through the day whilst managing to keep their noses clean, hop into bed. All of this glosses the body that comes along while, at the same time, brings it along metaphorically. Speaking of 'normal bodies' as movement and metaphor maps them as if they are a natural possession, as if they are not mapped at all.⁸

What is this often unnoticed – and often differential – work involved in negotiating everyday life in all its materiality? It is an entangled mixture of the practical (dressing, washing, cooking, cleaning, journeying); of our personal and social encounters with each other, artefacts and spaces; and of the everyday intersections between ourselves and the wider societies, cultures, economies and politics within which we locate ourselves and are located. These kinds of work are precisely the means through which the making and remaking of commonsense everyday attitudes and actions is achieved.

What then, is the invisibility work that enables architecture– which is so centrally about occupation and use – to avoid bodily and social difference? I will explore this further in the next section at the level of theory and practice. Here I suggest that it is most immediately how disability *and* ability are framed in relationship to each other that perpetuates a certain kind of 'obvious' commonsense. Buildings and spaces are first designed for the abled. Disabled people become a clearly bounded and separate category who now constitute a problem since they do not fit this norm; whose 'special needs' must now be met by adding extras onto what is already designed. Jay Dolmage calls this retro-fitting:

To retrofit is to add a component or accessory to something that has already been manufactured or built. This retrofit does not necessarily make the product function, does not necessarily fix a faulty product, but it acts as a sort of correction.⁹

Retrofitting 'solutions' are inherently reactive, either taken from the guidance and technical literature, or making corrections that respond to situations or problems that arise. They operate in a technical and legal space, not a creative or generative one. Where spaces and services are faulty, i.e. aspects of a building are not accessible,

then it becomes the individual problem of the 'misfitting' person to try and resolve¹⁰. By keeping disability separate as a clearly bounded category that can be dealt with *after* 'normal' design is done, bodies – that is abled bodies – can be assumed as non-problematic, unmarked and unencumbered subjects. But what if we do not see bodies in this way, but instead recognise that disability and ability are relational and ambiguous¹¹ and that bodies are never 'free' from the material spaces they occupy, or the activities they are undertaking? What if we try instead to open up what it is to have a body – or rather what Price calls a bodymind - that has everyday effects; is potentially fragile; is interesting for its differences not its averages; and is embodied, both in the sense of sheer corporeality and of social identities and labeling¹²(Fig 1.)?

Fig. 21.1: Table listing some implications of having a body. Adapted from Boys 2017: 149. Source: author.

The table in Figure 1 tentatively tries to chart what it is to have a body-in-space. Rather than technical guidance that attempts to pin down the functional differences of different impairments as if a neutral and objective issue (and as if in 'obvious' binary opposition to ability) the kinds of statement offered here suggest more hybrid and complex intersections. Whilst not avoiding the real effects that different impairments can have on accessing built space, such a framework wants to embed the inseparability of experience from social stereotyping and assumptions. It also begins to show how having a body (what a body can do/is expected to do/ is noticed as doing) is entangled simultaneously with space and with gender, sexuality, race and class as well as disability. Maybe such descriptions of interconnectedness can help rethink design processes beyond the normal or average body.

Going beyond assumptions of designing for abled and unencumbered also suggests recognizing what Partington-Sollinger calls disabled peoples' 'particular prowess for "reading space"¹³, or as Tobin Siebers puts it:

. . . 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.¹⁴

In this understanding disabled people are not passive users of services, but experts in negotiating material space. As I have written elsewhere, there are already a

considerable amount of narratives and critiques from diverse disabled people, that open up perceptions and experiences of both the material world and everyday social encounters; as well as many interesting projects by disabled artists and others that explore non-normal embodiment¹⁵. Disabled artists in particular have dealt with issues that 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 (Fig. 2), all of which offer potential new forms of architectural thinking and doing at the intersections of bodies, artefacts, encounters and material spaces.

Fig 21.2: Noëmi Lakmaier, We are for you because we are against them. 9 June 2009 The LAB, Dublin, Ireland. Curated by Liz Burns. Photograph by Hugh McElveen.
www.noemilakmaier.co.uk

The work of (not) including

The writings of disability studies scholars Tanya Titchkosky and Rod Michalko offer a powerful investigation of how disability and disabled people come to be treated differently. In 'To Pee or Not to Pee?' (2008) and *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (2011), for example, 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 its intentions around, and implementation of, inclusive building design - particularly accessible toilets. Her research shows 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*. The fact that the lack of an accessible toilet would prevent many disabled people from easily using the building was just something that happened. It did not make them angry or determined to make a change. The problem, then, was not articulated around the unacceptability of disabled people being discriminated against, but as the (unfortunate) result of the many difficulties. This, she suggests, persistently locates disabled people as 'included as excludable'¹⁶. In addition, for Titchkosky, such comments are not neutral. They are the justificatory narratives that maintain a particular shape to everyday social and spatial practices:

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 sensibility¹⁷.

I suggest that critically and creatively engaging with concepts such as ‘included as excludable’, as well as unraveling the everyday talk that makes and remakes social and spatial practices in particular ways and not others, are vital to getting past the invisibility work that puts disability in its place; and are also important means to interrogate shifts in the contemporary gendering of space¹⁸. Other authors have examined how these processes of including but not including operate institutionally – for example, through ‘diversity’ policies that work only at the level of appearances, as Sara Ahmed eloquently describes in her book *On Being Included*¹⁹.

As well as these direct everyday practices of justified exclusion, dis/ability (just like gender, sexuality, race and class) also comes to matter in particular ways and not others across architecture as a practice and as a discipline. Elsewhere I have investigated how different architectural theories and approaches assume particular bodies²⁰. This is not about complaining that such architects do not take account of accessibility. It is to unravel what kinds of bodies are being imagined, and what it is that matters about these bodies. Of course, the assumed rational and functional body/user of modernism has been critiqued²¹ and there is now considerable interest in the sensual and feeling body, sometimes through an emphasis on the experiential, elsewhere around bodily augmentation and cyborgian robotics. But these still start from completely abled bodies. In fact, a current persistent problem for architects is that the very unmarked nature of being able-bodied means that material space is *not* noticed. This may suggest a recognition of the problem Titchkosky highlights above, but in architectural theory and practice something else usually happens. Titchkosky (and disability studies scholars more generally) are looking for a form of practice that interrogates differences between bodies and reveals their inequitable spatialisation. Contemporary design theories and methods, on the other hand, concentrate on how able-bodied occupants can be persuaded to pay attention to – to revel in - their specific surroundings. In cultural theory as well as architecture, for example, enthusiasm for cyborgian forms and augmented bodies becomes about playing only with the *abled* body²². As Davis writes:

The disabled body is a nightmare for the fashionable discourse of theory because that discourse has been limited by the very predilection of the dominant, ableist culture. The body is seen as a site of ‘jouissance’ that defies reason, that takes dominant culture and its rigid, power-laden vision

of the body to task . . . The nightmare of the (disabled) body is one that is deformed, maimed . . . Rather than face this ragged image, the critic turns to the fluids of sexuality, the gloss of lubrication . . . But almost never to the body of the differently abled²³.

Being Other becomes no longer a threat or a problem but a freely chosen position by theorists who can then claim their radical 'transgression' (and ignore both their own privilege and abledness) by deliberately appearing to place themselves 'on the margins', outside of everyday conventions and stereotypes. But this is a peculiar kind of Otherness, which values specific qualities – unproblematically imbued with autonomy, mobility and agency – whilst in fact obscuring the realities of diverse kinds of embodiment, and the persistent marginalization of specific groups. Again, then, we need to unravel the kind of work that is going on in theory, practice, education to better understand what it is that persistently matters about bodies within architecture and what the effects are on bodies as a concept, and on the perceptions and experiences of diverse bodies in built space itself.

Going beyond invisibility work

There are many writings and projects that start from disability and difference, which can inform architectural feminisms, as well as architecture more generally. These also constitute work; the work of perpetuating and/or contesting unequal and normative practices through architectural, artistic, political and personal interventions. I have illustrated many examples elsewhere, and there remain many more to be captured and shared (Fig. 3).

Fig. 22.3: Interior Architecture students from Westminster University London explore different perspectives on space. Tilted Horizons workshop co-created by disabled artist Liz Crow and design tutor Julia Dwyer; as part of Arts Council funded Disabled Artists Making Dis/Ordinary Spaces (DAMD/OS) Project. Staircase, Bartlett School of Architecture UCL, UK May 2017.

Here though, in conclusion, I want to explore a particular case of disabled people being 'included as excludable' and the justificatory narratives that accompanied it. I want to raise questions about how non-disabled feminists (including myself) can pay attention to, challenge and transform their own unthinking invisibility work in 'forgetting' about disability discrimination, even whilst engaging critically and creatively with gender. Feminism - as with disability studies –has a central tenet that research and practice must be more than an academic endeavour: it must also aim to improve the position of disadvantaged groups in society; this needs both an intersectional approach and an everyday activism²⁴.

In January 2017 the feminist philosopher Judith Butler briefly arrived in London to give a public lecture at University College London (UCL) in the UK. At the last minute the venue was changed to accommodate the large demand for tickets. The new lecture hall is inaccessible, and when a physically disabled student complained, she was merely told by the university that yes indeed, this was the case – the hall was not accessible to people using wheelchairs. In response the student, Naomi Jacobs, organized a protest letter signed by 66 disabled and non-disabled academics and students, and Butler was contacted about the situation; whilst Jacobs reported on the ongoing situation on her blog²⁵. UCL's answer this time was that she could watch the lecture remotely, via live streaming, this was their suggested retro-fitting. Jacobs then proposed a boycott, one taken up by other disabled people and their friends. No non-disabled people – including those who signed the letter – participated in the boycott, or shared with her the relegation to watching the lecture remotely via a screen.

Throughout UCL made no apologies, rather giving the kinds of justificatory narratives that Titchkosky met in Canada; that it is just one instance, that such a situation could not be helped, that of course they wished the lecture theatre was accessible, that they would try and do better next time, that it was a rational decision based on health and safety, that it is okay that some people who were included just happen to be now excluded. And after the lecture, UCL managers asked Jacobs to help them make more events accessible. As she notes:

I'm a professional equality trainer, but like many disabled people, I'm often asked for my expertise and emotional labour to 'help' institutions discriminate less, *without pay*²⁶.

Here, disabled people's expertise in negotiating the built environment becomes something that is their responsibility to share on a voluntary basis. Able-bodied people need helping out of their ignorance – an ignorance that is “not the result of a benign gap in our knowledge, but [of] deliberate choices to pursue certain kinds of knowledge while ignoring others”²⁷. This ‘solution to difficulties’ looks to a disabled individual to do the work; both the actual work of advice, but also the work of *representation* – to stand for both their own category of impairment, and for disability as a whole. As Jacobs goes on to say, expecting this work is the normal experience of disabled people – “fighting disablism and barriers, are full-time jobs in themselves, on top of our other work.”

This is the endless, unnoticed work of being disabled in an ableist society. Again, we have to ask; what is the invisibility work going on in framing lack of access and inclusion as an individualized problem only for those who face its consequences? In the UCL case, Judith Butler has promised to refuse to lecture in inaccessible venues in the future. Jacobs also recognises that she had some support from non-disabled people; but that this did not go as far as a boycott. Anger at inequality did not affect or change the desire to see Butler ‘in the flesh’ even whilst some disabled colleagues had to watch her remotely. What would it take, Jacobs asks, for all non-disabled academics to refuse to speak in inaccessible venues? It took the disabled artist Ryan Gander’s refusal to speak at the Architectural Association in London before they finally got design students to create a decent – even if temporary – ramp (Figure 4). Previously there has been a ramshackle, slippery and dangerous metal sheet laid on the front steps by a security officer each time a wheelchair user attended. To me, it literally expressed the institution’s attitude to dis/ability.

Interestingly, disability studies scholars and activists have often focused on the university and its framing of ‘normal’ academic life²⁸. This work mixes theory with practice; it explores both how to theorise what is happening, and to intervene through the creation of alternatives. For Mia Mingus, as for others, this centres on collective access – the moving beyond merely individualised logistical requirements to the creation of other kinds of social-material spaces. For example:

I got to spend over a week creating collective access with a group of twenty-three disabled folks and our non-disabled comrades. I got to spend eight days getting a glimpse into a different world and experiencing a kind of interdependency that let me loosen my shoulders; that let me breathe.

Creating Collective Access was about re-thinking how we, as disabled and chronically ill people, engage in movement spaces. This was about imagining something more and knowing that we had to do it for ourselves because it is so rare for movement spaces to ever consider disability and access in ways that go beyond logistics; in ways that challenge the ableist culture of our work. This was about being very clear that we wanted to shift the individualized and independent understanding of access and queer it and color it interdependent. This was about building crip solidarity. We wanted to create a liberated space. We would pool our resources: body and ability, financial, material and more. We would not just think about disability as separate from

class, age, race, queerness, family, children, gender, citizenship, violence, but we would understand it as intimately connected²⁹.

Helping to create these kinds of spaces should be central to feminists within and across architecture, both disabled and non-disabled. Non-disabled feminists can also do more. It is not enough to be just vaguely angry about lack of access, or to default to the same justificatory narratives as others. Non-disabled people need to directly support disabled people's access and inclusion. We need to take notice of how disability and ability intersect with gender, and explore the many implications. And we need to stop doing the kinds of invisibility work that keep disability as a concept, and disabled people as a constituency, trapped within everyday architectural practices in the limited (and limiting) spaces of technical guidance and non-social, atheoretical framings.

Here, then, is an initial list of what this implies. It means taking notice of disabled peoples' various perceptions and experiences; as well as recognising the ambiguity and complexity of categories around both disability and ability, and resisting stereotypes. It means considering the everyday work for both disabled and abled people in living different lives, in our diverse intersections with built space; paying attention to the unnoticed assumptions of being abled; opening up to view what constitutes 'normal' social and spatial practices and creatively intervening towards enabling rather than disabling effects; challenging the lack of engagement with dis/ability in architectural theories and practices; starting from the richness and variety that bodily difference and unruly bodies can bring to design and related practices and discourses; and working towards conceptual frameworks and methods which critically and creatively inter-weave questions of form-making with better understandings of how bodily difference and the spatial-material are entangled.

Notes

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 - 16 Titchkosky *The Question of Access* 2011
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