The DisOrdinary Architecture Project starts from the belief that improving the design of built space is not just about “adding” disabled people to existing environments to better meet their needs. It is about exposing and challenging underlying attitudes, assumptions and practices that frame disabled people in particular and limited ways, both in everyday life and through the education and practice of architectural and urban design. So, rather than providing yet more inclusive or universal design principles we begin by challenging ablest attitudes and practices. We hope this can open up alternative kinds of inventive interventions towards, not just better inclusive ableist attitudes and practices. We hope this can open up alternative ways, both in everyday life and through the education and practice about exposing and challenging underlying attitudes, assumptions and practices to existing environments to better meet their “needs.” It is the DisOrdinary Architecture Project it is precisely such creativity that can inform design practices in a much more deeply and thought-provoking way than current access and inclusion approaches. “Leigh Bowery, video still from KariAnne Aranello and Aaron Williamson, The Disabled Avant-Garde Today (2000).”

Disabled people have a tragic life. We should feel sorry for them, and try to help as much as possible.

**Assumed Problem**

One of the privileges of ableism is to misunderstand disabled peoples’ diverse lives and experiences. Underpinned by a clear and seeming straightforward division between “us” and “them,” it enables able-bodied people to simultaneously assume their own bodies as unproblematic, ordinary and unnoticed; whilst framing disabled bodies in simplistic ways as fixed, lacking, abnormal and a problem. In fact, many disabled people will say that their biggest problem is not the fact of having an impairment, but the disabling attitudes and barriers that come from other people only seeing that impairment. This is what disabled people mean when they talk about the “Social Model,” as opposed to the Medical Model of disability. Rather than seeing disability as an individual personal tragedy, we need to understand how society itself is disabling (or enabling) by creating barriers for some people and not others.

**STEP ONE**

**Assumed problem**

Disabled people have a tragic life. We should feel sorry for them, and try to help as much as possible.

**Actual Problem**

One of the privileges of ableism is to misunderstand disabled peoples’ diverse lives and experiences. Underpinned by a clear and seeming straightforward division between “us” and “them,” it enables able-bodied people to simultaneously assume their own bodies as unproblematic, ordinary and unnoticed; whilst framing disabled bodies in simplistic ways as fixed, lacking, abnormal and a problem. In fact, many disabled people will say that their biggest problem is not the fact of having an impairment, but the disabling attitudes and barriers that come from other people only seeing that impairment. This is what disabled people mean when they talk about the “Social Model,” as opposed to the Medical Model of disability. Rather than seeing disability as an individual personal tragedy, we need to understand how society itself is disabling (or enabling) by creating barriers for some people and not others.

**STEP TWO**

**Assumed problem**

In building and urban design, we need to do things for disabled people that help them lead a more “normal” life.

**Actual problem**

Current built environment practices often reproduce normative built spaces that privilege the abled, whilst discriminating against the disabled. This is because we live in a world where individual mobility, autonomy and personal competence are 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.” (Robin Seibers, “The Art of Disability,” in Disability Quarterly Vol 20, No 2, 2010).

Disabled people have in fact little choice but to be experts in negotiating the built environment, with valuable knowledge and experiences that can deeply inform building and urban design. We need to find better ways of taking notice of diverse perceptions and experiences of occupying built space that open up “normal” architecture and built environment design practices to question. Collaborating with disabled artists, as DisOrdinary Architecture does, is one way to do this because it enables an equality of creative dialogue and action. Another is to recognize that there are already many disabled designers, students, teachers and associated experts working in the field, and that building on this as something vital to design practice. Able-bodied people also need to find ways to challenge their own privileges around, and assumptions about, different kinds of bodies-in-space.

- Start from disabled people’s creativity, activism, and scholarship.
- Co-design with disabled people as creative experts.
- Check your privilege.

**Doing disability differently (1)**

[“...disabled people have to be ingenious to live in societies that are by their nature ableist.” (Tatiana Martinez Soto’s Master architecture project as part of the “Recovering,” curated by Ali Azerami. / Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2018.)]
By starting from difference — from mis-fitting, unruly and non-conforming bodies — disability becomes a creative generator, producing new, previously unnoticed ways into designing.

**STEP THREE /// Assumed problem /**

Disability is best understood through a series of functional categories that limit actions (reduced mobility, blindness, deafness etc.), and thus can be ameliorated through design.

**Actual problem /**

Disability (and ability) are not fixed functional categories. Understandings of what counts as disability and impairment vary through time and space and are always dynamic, ambiguous and contested. In addition, no body is just a functional entity: we all engage simultaneously through our bodies' functional needs, our personal histories and preferences, and the everyday world of normal social and spatial practices. Yet architectural and urban design continues to treat disability simplistically as merely a functional issue. In this world, people with a multiplicity of mobility differences get called "wheelchairers," and a limited framing of physical disability tends to be seen as a "functional" issue. In this world, people with a multiple and dynamic, ambiguous and contested. In addition, no body is just a functional entity: we all engage simultaneously through our bodies' functional needs, our personal histories and preferences, and the everyday world of normal social and spatial practices. Yet architectural and urban design continues to treat disability simplistically as merely a functional issue. In this world, people with a multiplicity of mobility differences get called "wheelchairers," and a limited framing of physical disability tends to be seen as a "functional" issue.

**Doing dis/ability differently (3) /**

Disabled people are just as diverse as any other social group, and their requirements and preferences are just as likely to vary. Instead of trying to pin down functional differences as if these were historical "truths" rather than complex socially constructed relationships, we need to ask who counts as more or less human in different situations, as well as how built space, facilities and services assume and support different kinds of bodies before others. This requires seeing disability and ability as a series of overlapping concepts and experiences, with varying and different effects that are ambiguous and relational. We need to explore how to understand disability as an unstable category, and interrogate why attempts are so often made to define it as a fixed (and preferably avoidable) category.

In fact a rich seam of theoretical and critical thought already exists, but seems to have had almost no impact on architectural and related discourses — a huge gap for the subject. Through the developing field of disability studies, disability arts practice and disability activism, there are now many scholars, artists and advocates examining how disability intersects with social, spatial and material practices. Many of these studies and projects have a direct relevance to architecture and can be found in books, project websites and disability-led blogs. Many of these authors and activists draw upon the Social Model of disability, but also go beyond it to a more relational approach. This means examining the contestation and politicization of disability as a category, one that always already intersects with other notions of what constitutes both normal and non-conforming bodies.

- Reflect on the language and assumptions you make about disability and access.
- Don’t make access and inclusion disabled people’s problem.
- Recognize that disability and ability are socially constructed in different ways in various places and times.
- Challenge attitudes that divide the world into “normal” and “abnormal” bodies, when this is to the detriment of the latter.

**STEP FOUR /// Assumed problem /**

The design process obviously starts from the needs of normal people. Special requirements for disabled people need to be added on afterwards as reasonable adjustments, if feasible.

**Actual problem /**

By dividing the population into an able and normal majority who get designed for first, and separating out a disabled minority whose "needs" are retrofitted as an add-on to the design process, we reproduce a particular version of assumptions about the relative value of disabled people, and their place in society. They are to be included, but as an afterthought — and can also be excluded, on what non-disabled people decide are "reasonable" grounds. Disability Studies scholar Jay Dolmage names this "retrofitting": "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." (Map- ping Composition: Inviting Disability in the Front Door,” 2008)

Such a practice is discriminatory: it normalizes a situation where many disabled people are severely limited in what they can do, whilst environments continue to be designed so that "normal" people can get about ever more easily.

**Doing dis/ability differently (4) /**

Retrofitting seems a very limited way of designing for the wide and fascinating variety of human embodiment, and ways of being in the world. Furthermore, it is often supported by everyday stories non-disabled people tell — what Tanya Titchkosky calls...
The Mapping Access project, based in Nashville, Tennessee, and led by Amy Haynes, is exploring co-producing as a means of improving access through critical, collective and participatory approaches. It does this both to make real disability-led improvements to the current university campus, and to investigate how larger scale data collection can also be made critical and inclusive. This has included speculative design workshops where students and staff collaborate to strategise approaches to collective access on university campuses. Universi- ties are spaces in which power and social norms often coalesce in the structures of built environments. While “accessibility” may often appear as a value in planning decisions, questions re- main of what types of bodies and minds appear qualified to be university citizens. This interactive workshop considered medical, social, and cultural approaches to disability and design. It examined the concept of “accessibility” as it manifests in built environments, social relations, and medical encounters. Then, participants engaged in speculative design projects to re-consider particular design problems, drawing upon their lived experiences and knowledge of built environments to identify methods for world-building based in collective, participatory, and sustainable action.

“Mapping Access” project, Speculative Design Workshop in collaboration with Syracuse University and SUNY Upstate Medical School, on April 19, 2017.

The “Resistant Sitting” project looked at different ways of sitting (in public) in older age, working with a pensioner’s lunch club in East London, UK. The project both exposes older people not as passive and frail, but as creative — even potentially subver- sive — transformers of existing material landscapes, and at the same time subtly critiques the dry technical language of “nor- mal” design representation. Sophie Handler + Aging Facil- ities: Diagram from Alternative Seating Guide. Aging Facilities is initiated and managed by Sophie Handler, with support and funding from the RIBA/ICE McKinnell/Burney and the Arts and Hum- anities Research Council UK.

Don’t retreat into justificatory narratives, to justify leaving non- conforming bodies out of built spaces.

- Challenge “common sense” rhetoric that treat disabled peo- ple as marginal, invisible or difficult.
- Aim for architecture and urban design that can ameliorate social and spatial disadvantage, not exacerbate it.

STEP FIVE ///
Assumed problem /
Disabled people are not that important. They represent only a small proportion of the population who can be seen to make unreasonable and expensive demands on building and urban design, that are not really fair on non-disabled people.

Actual problem /
In the current political climate there are increasingly more plac- es where it is common to frame disabled people as potential “scroungers” in everyday language and the media; to see them as a “drag” on society and economic productivity, and as being somehow shameful. This is the context in which rather than just letting disability be a marginal concern for architecture and the built environment, non-disabled people need to reflect on, and act towards enabling social and spatial justice for everyone.

Doing dis/ability differently (6) /

- Start from difference as a creative generator.
- Redefine access and inclusion as a collective, complex en- deavor.

STEP SEVEN ///
Assumed problem /
Legal and regulatory requirements around disability are neces- sary, but mainly act to reduce design creativity. They will always tend towards the “politically correct,” boring and dull aspects of architectural and urban design.
Treatability and design fluency, means that architectural and urban designers are missing huge creative opportunities. The actual problem is that the whole language of accessibility and inclusive design tends to be framed around a belief in functional solutions to the problems of a range of specific impairments, which — if it is assumed — can be simply, coherently and comprehensively designed for so as to meet the “needs” of disabled people. Even more problematically, by making access issues a final technical and legal “add-on,” we avoid starting design from a much more interesting and relevant place: the complex, contradictory and hard-to-meet perceptions and experiences of our many different ways of being in the world.

Doing disability differently (7) / Re-thinking our attitudes and practices around ability and disability — moving beyond either the requirements of building regulations or even inclusive design principles — means committing to challenging the normative aspects of architectural and built environment practices. The DisOrdinary Architecture Project believes that this has the potential to be a deeply creative act. Exploring our multiple ways of being in the world, together with creative disabled people, turns out to be a deeply enjoyable, refreshing and thought-provoking activity. This is because engaging with disability, difference and inclusion is inherently expansive and intersectional; it is about opening things up, rather than closing approaches down around assumed common sense about what is normal. Unraveling how disability comes to be patterned into built spaces with particular differential and inequitable effects actually offers powerful creative insights and can suggest, more inclusive alternatives. In this understanding, doing disability in architectural and urban design is actually harder than before — there is no assumption of a “correct” functional solution, of merely meeting the demands rather than others, and can help us better understand who this architecture and urban design is inculcated in particular ways rather than others, and can help us better understand who this benefits and who it restricts.

• Get involved with, or be an ally to, disability-led campaigns for social and spatial justice.
• Challenge the ableism in architectural and urban design theories, methods and practices.

Jos Boys is co-founder with Zoe Parlington of UK-based The DisOrdinary Architecture Project. She is the author of Doing Disability Differently: an alternative handbook on architecture, disability, and designing for everyday life (Routledge 2014), and editor of Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader (Routledge 2017). She works with writing, photography, installation and new media. She is a design tutor, researcher, academic developer, consultant and community-based practitioner and is most interested in how to better understand everyday social and spatial practices.

In the “Crash Course in Cloud-Spotting” project, artist Raquel Meseguer offered everyone an invitation to pause; to listen, to rest. She sees this as an act to invisible disability and to acts of bravery we don’t see. She wants to highlight the invisible disability of chronic pain by creating a physical space that represents those who experience it. This is now expanding as the Resting Spaces Network.


David Gissen is one of an increasing number of historians, theorists and critics who want to open up assumptions within architectural practice and discourse about disability. As part of his history, theory and criticism (HTC) experiments series at California College of the Arts, he made a design proposition as an example of how to critically and creatively challenge architecture’s own knowledge base about itself and about its history. He did this by re-imprinting disability differently, into a reconstruction project for the Acropolis in Athens. He shows both the 19th-century path to the top and the current access route, as being set in their own time, one aiming to capture a deeply romantic and nationalist notion of the journey as deliberately difficult, and the other to meet the needs of disabled people. He argues instead that a 4th-century BC path should be re-instated, one that provides a ceremonial ramp from the base to the top of the Acropolis. He thus re-maps both our assumptions about “inclusive design” and the history of architectural interpreta-tions of this iconic site. / David Gissen (renderings by Victor Hadjiikyriacou), “Proposed Reconstruction of the Acropolis Ramp,” 2013.