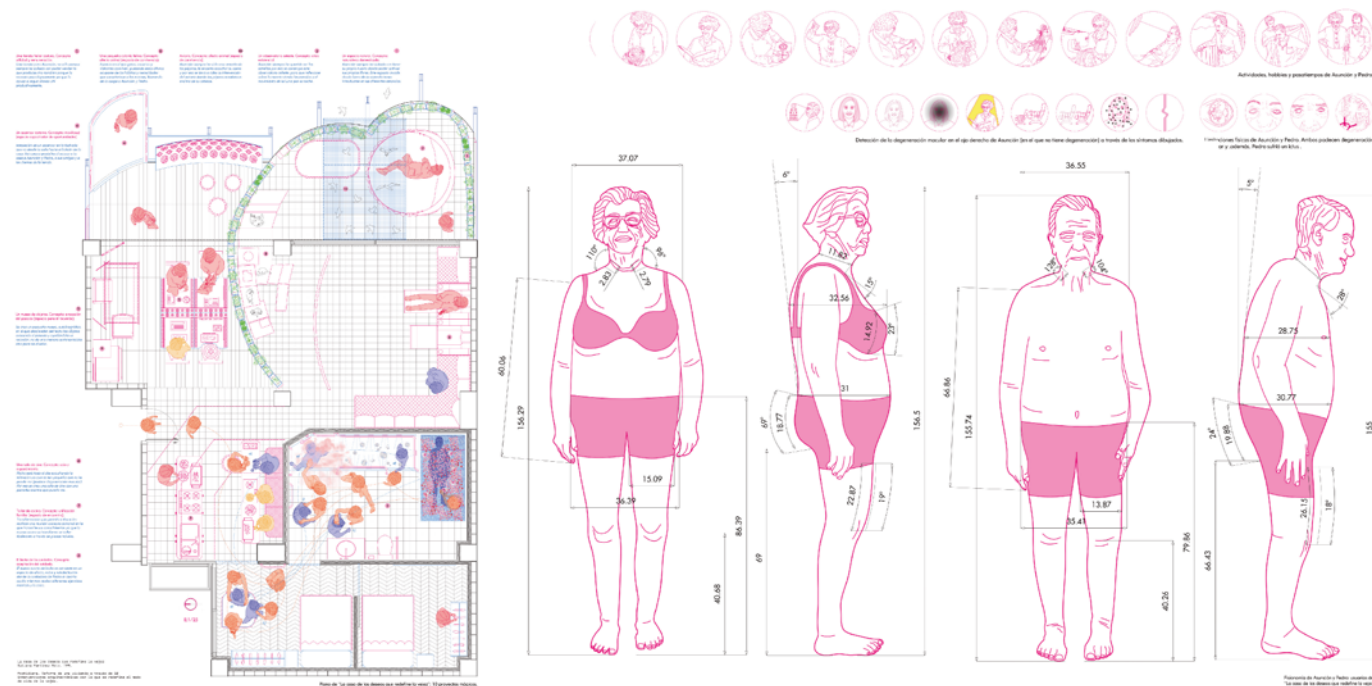


# THE DISORDINARY ARCHITECTURE PROJECT

## A HANDY GUIDE FOR DOING DISABILITY DIFFERENTLY IN ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN DESIGN

JOS BOYS



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 ableist attitudes and practices. We hope this can open up alternative kinds of inventive interventions towards, not just better inclusive design “solutions,” but also better understandings of how the “normal” is constructed in everyday life, and how it can be critically and creatively contested, underpinned by a commitment to social and spatial justice for all.

Most crucially, we have to ask why disability has somehow remained stuck in a non-historical, atheoretical and seriously underexplored category in relationship to building and urban design practices. It is invisible in both avant-garde and mainstream architectural theories and discourses, just as it has been a persistent absence in critical and cultural theory more generally. Perhaps this illustrates just how deeply

disability remains widely avoided, compared to other disadvantaged identities. It seems that we assume “disability” to be unable to bring any kind of criticality or creativity to the practice of architecture.

The DisOrdinary Architecture Project aims to change this through the accumulation of multiple small actions that together can create a substantial culture shift, both across built-environment disciplinary practices and in societies more generally. We do this by always starting from disability and difference as a means of revealing architecture and urban design’s deepest assumptions about who is valued and noticed, and who (and what) is marginalized and forgotten, in the processes of producing built space. We look forward to a time when starting from disability would just be an ordinary part of designing, an obvious place to start; and where ability (just like whiteness or maleness or straightness) would no longer be the invisible and natural side of the disabled/abled binary but, instead, a central part of the problem. Here we suggest seven steps to enable non-disabled people to better pay attention to their often unnoticed everyday attitudes, as well as offer ways to explore disability and difference as a creative design generator and as a powerful critical tool for investigating what constitutes “normality.”



### 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 abled-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.

#### Doing dis/ability Differently (1) /

“[...] disabled people have to be ingenious to live in societies that are by their

(left page) Tatiana Martinez Soto’s Master architecture project as part of “Becoming,” curated by Atxu Amann. / Spanish Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2018.

(left above) In the “The Disabled Avant-Garde Today!” artists Katherine Araniello and Aaron Williamson respond to, and re-make artwork based on, some seminal creative practitioners including Leigh Bowery, Jake and Dinos Chapman and Tom and Jerry. Through a series of videos the artists (re-)perform their various (non-disabled) heroes and are by turns hilarious, absurd and sarcastic commentators. Though humorous, their point is a savage one: nobody will, of course, ever believe that disabled people could actually form an artistic avant-garde. For The DisOrdinary Architecture Project it is precisely such creativity that can inform design practices in a much more lively and thought-provoking way than current access and inclusion approaches. / “Leigh Bowery,” video still from Katherine Araniello and Aaron Williamson, *The Disabled Avant-Garde Today!* (2006).

(left below) Disabled artist Liz Crow co-designed a workshop called “Tilted Horizons” with Julia Dwyer, tutor on the Interior Architecture undergraduate course at the University of Westminster. Students explored how lying down in public intersects with both material possibilities and everyday social encounters. / “Tilted Horizons,” Arts Council England (ACE) funded project by DisOrdinary Architecture, 2017. Photograph by Jos Boys.

*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.”* (Tobin Siebers, “The Art of Disability,” in *Disability Studies Quarterly* Vol30, No2, 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 aiming to build 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.

### 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



both highly valued and seen as just ordinary and “natural.” People who are less than fully mobile, are interdependent with others, or seem less capable then become perceived as “difficult” because they don’t “fit” with this world.

**Doing dis/ability differently (2) /**

Rather than enabling more people to navigate the material space in a “normal” way, we could value and learn from our many diverse ways in being in the world. We need to find ways of starting from the richness that neuro-/bio-diversity brings, from uniqueness and difference and not from bodily norms and averages. Rather than assume the superiority of particular types of competence (based on individualism and capitalist norms of productivity), we could learn from variation, from slowing down and supporting each other. This means challenging assumptions of normalcy in our everyday routines and space; and investigating what kinds of bodies are imagined and operationalized in building and urban design, so as to reimagine these differently; and as a means of generating new kinds of design investigations and practices.

By starting from difference — from mis-fitting, unruly and non-conforming bodies — dis/ability 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 “wheelchairs,” and a limited framing of physical disability tends to be the only impairment that even begins to count in design processes.

**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 ahistorical “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 certain kinds of bodies before others. This requires seeing disability and ability as a series of overlapping concepts and experiences, with varying and differential 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 abled 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.” (“Mapping 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





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 ode 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. Raquel Meseguer + Uncharted Collective, "A Crash Course in Cloud-Spotting (the subversive act of horizontality)," (2016).

#### Actual problem /

Treating disability as perceived drag on, or potential limit to architectural creativity 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 — 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 dis/ability differently (7) /

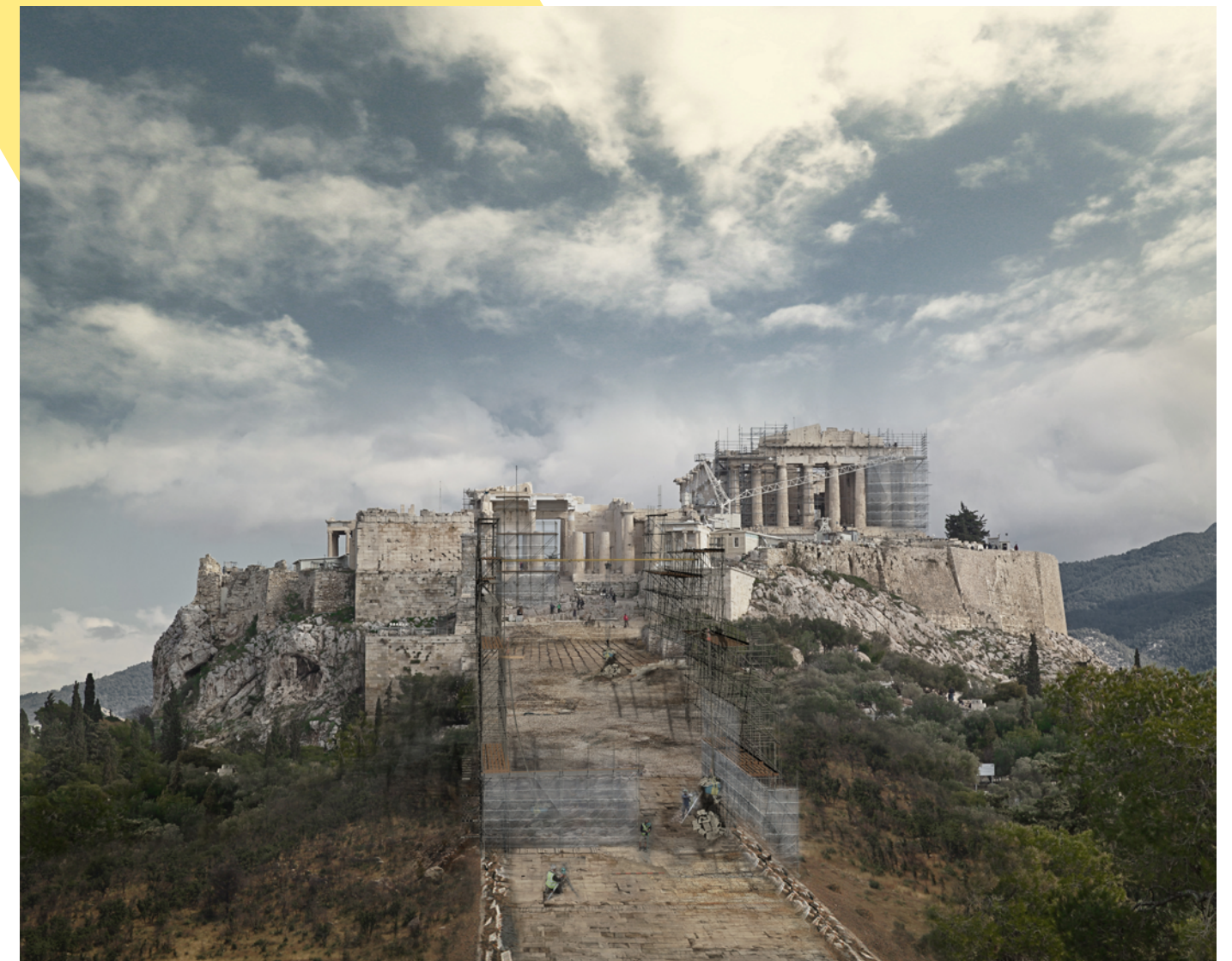
Re-thinking our attitudes and practices around ability and disability — moving beyond either the requirements of building regulations or even inclusive design principles — means committing to challenging the normative aspects of architectural and built environment practices. The DisOrdinary Architecture 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 dis/ability 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 of building codes. Instead there is a committed engagement with a multitude of disabled perspectives and experiences, as a collective movement towards more equitable built space.

This also means that starting from disability and difference opens up innovative and unexpected understandings across the whole range of built-environment education and practices; its histories and theories; its attitudes towards, and deployment of, technologies, as well as in its design processes and professional frameworks. Disability studies scholars like Jay Dolmage, Alison Kafer, Elizabeth Guffey, David Gissen, Aimi Hamraie, Rod Michalko, David Serlin, Tobin Siebers, Tanya Titchkosky, Bess Williamson and Melanie Yergeau are already offering new kinds of histories and theories about, and critiques of, architecture

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 dis/ability. 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-inserting 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 6th-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 interpretations of this iconic site. / David Gissen (renderings by Victor Hadjikyriacou), "Proposed Reconstruction of the Acropolis Ramp," 2013.



and urban design. These, as well as many studies and projects yet to be done, offer a vital means for understanding how 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 Partington of UK-based The DisOrdinary Architecture Project. She is the author of *Doing Disability Differently: an alternative handbook on architecture, dis/ability, 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.**