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Doing disability differently, in architectural history

Anna Ulrikke Andersen in conversation with Jos Boys

Anna Ulrikke Andersen reflects on a conversation with Jos Boys concerning disability in architectural history, imagining how to start with disability and difference, considering how to pay attention, and exploring other ways of writing history.

'I don't do architectural history', architecture-trained activist and theorist Jos Boys tells me as we are approaching the end of an hour-long conversation and interview for this special issue of **arq**. Already in the 1980s, Boys established herself as a ground-breaking architectural practitioner and thinker through her contribution to the field of feminist architectural practice, co-founding the Matrix collective.[1] Yet, with her monograph *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook for Dis/Ability, and Designing for Everyday Life*,[2] and the edited volume *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader*,[3] her feminist approach took a turn towards disability arts and scholarship, informed by the emerging field of disability studies.[4] She co-founded The DisOrdinary Architecture Project with disabled artist Zoe Partington in 2007. Since then the platform has initiated and organised events and projects, published, discussed, and redefined how we think about the disabled body and mind in architecture today.[5] It was through The DisOrdinary Architecture Project that we first met, as I was invited to Architecture Beyond Sight, a



1 **Still from *Architecture Beyond Sight* (2019). Blind architect Chris Downey tutoring on the Architecture Beyond Sight Summer School 2019, coordinated by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project on behalf of The Bartlett, UCL. Film directed by Anna Ulrikke Andersen. Produced by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project.**

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summer school for blind and visually impaired students in 2019. I was invited to engage with the core thematic of the week by making a film,which introduced me to Boys' unique approach.[6] Stills from this film accompany the article *[1–3]*. As an architecture-trained educator, thinker, and writer, Boys has also made her mark on architectural culture. While she states that she herself does not do architectural history, I, as an architectural historian, wish to ask how her contribution might benefit our field. In what ways does her thinking inform the discipline of architectural history?

'You don't have to start from nothing …'

According to Boys herself, she fell into disability studies as 'an accident', something that happened as she was experiencing not quite fitting with 'normal' ways of doing things in architecture. Fitting, or misfitting, according to seminal disability studies theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, all depends on the circumstances.[7] Who you are, where you are, and who you are with, shape an experience of fitting in or not. This problem is relational, and it is spatial, Boys explains, and she wanted to dig deeper into it, particularly the creative and critical value of *misfitting*. When encountering a challenge, problem or issue, Boys says, she reads. Out of feminism, she connected with disability, finding it still stuck (compared to other under-represented groups) in commonplace assumptions that could only see disabled people as a problem for architecture, without any social, cultural, political, or historical context. Finding this new set of thinkers, ideas, and perspectives from disability studies, she says, opened up a whole new world, 'which has just been extraordinarily interesting and enjoyable to engage with since.'[8] An enjoyable and extraordinarily interesting body of work, a set of methods and ideas that already exist, but which are almost unknown to architectural education and practice. We don't have to start from nothing. Methods, projects, theories, approaches, and trials and failures do exist. Where do we begin?

To the source

Let us begin with archival research. When it comes to the topic of disability, finding material in archives can be difficult, or even impossible. As decisions have been made as to what has been kept, recorded, and cared for, the stories, materials, and experiences of disabled people have often been kept out of the record, and their perspectives remain almost non-existent or hidden.[9]

But archives created solely for the purpose of keeping records of disability-related material do exist. For instance, the Disability Archive at the Centre for Disability Studies in Leeds holds records related to the independent living movement in the UK as well as much else.[10] The National Disability Arts Collection and Archive (NDACA) holds material related to the Disability Arts Movement in the UK from the 1970s.[11] Still, a lot of material is being kept by artists and activists themselves, Boys explains, because disabled people don't always trust that archives will reflect their knowledge and experiences accurately.[12] 'There's a lot of history still to be unpicked', she adds.

Yet hidden histories of disabilities can be found in unexpected places, and there might be other reasons that material remains overlooked. When Boys led the project 'So What is Normal? Disability and Architecture Resources for Education', architectural historian Katie Lloyd Thomas undertook research at the archive of the Royal Institute of British Architects.[13] Lloyd Thomas was specifically searching for traces of disability and disabled people in the existing collection, which had not been looked at before. She realised that many stories remained hidden because historians did not search effectively. Boys recalls:

> *People literally not wanting to type in words like 'cripple' or 'retard' into the search engines. So already people had a kind of blockage that was completely misplaced. You had to be willing to use that in desktop searching and to be capable of finding those keywords.*

The consequence of leaving these stories out of history books and journals is that dominant narratives and normative tendencies get reiterated. 'Just as the Global South has tended not to exist for a very long time in histories of architecture, so dominant ableist narratives tend to perpetuate themselves', Boys explains, drawing parallels to feminist and queer critical theory. We should not shy away from using outdated terminologies, to allow hidden stories to rise from the archive. Only then can stories about disability and the experiences of disabled people make their way into architectural history and challenge the status quo; both by investigating who the canon leaves out (and why), and by interrogating the spatial processes through which societies in various times and places make difference and inequalities 'concrete'.

Paying attention

It is a question of paying more attention to these resources and 'hidden' materials, but also paying attention to, and centring, disabled people's diverse perspectives. According to Boys, unpacking these untold perspectives and experiences is vital to help us understand the spatial, social, and material practices that value and support some bodies and not others. How does built space organise people differently and differentially? To Boys, such explorations have a great potential to uncover new, critical approaches to the built environment, allowing us to connect disabled and non-disabled interrelationships with built space in different places and times. For instance, the history of asylums could be revisited. She explains:

> *In the history of asylums, the ways people have been categorised and re-arranged into different types of buildings across material space is completely entangled with the history of welfare and housing. They're the same thing! Who gets sorted into different types, how does that sorting process happen and how does the spatial and material organisation of that process separate out and locate people unequally, into different architectural conditions?*

Boys argues that architectural histories that uncover such linkages are urgently needed. Such investigations counteract the dominant narratives, letting us in on a critical and creative analytic tool that gives us new ways of thinking about history, memory, archives, the world around us, and how that might be designed.

Boys' many collaborations with disabled artists have co-explored how diverse disabled people occupy built space differently, both because of bodymind[14] variations from the 'norm' and in having to negotiate everyday environments full of physical and attitudinal barriers. Taking notice of the various creative life hacks disabled people come up with to make spaces more amendable and pleasurable can help us unravel the detailed ways in which built space fails to support non-normative bodies. Boys draws attention to the work of American disability studies historians Bess Williamson and Elizabeth Guffey who have been looking into the ways disabled people have always invented new life hacks.[15] 'I think there's such a lot to learn in terms of technology and the value of tinkering, of how we think about care and repair, those little adaptations, and how they were shared and reused and changed and adapted as

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2 **Still from *Architecture Beyond Sight* (2019). Artist Rachel Gadsden leading a workshop of body mapping with blind and visually impaired students at the Architecture Beyond Sight Summer School, 2019. Directed by Anna Ulrikke Andersen and produced by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project.**

a kind of very collaborative activity', Boys explains. She also notes that there are other scholars already exploring how disability enriches various aspects of architectural history, such as David Serlin in his study of Helen Keller,[16] Kim Kullman revisiting the history of the Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley,[17] and Jordan Whitewood-Neal, exploring the short-lived disability-led course at the Architectural Association in London.[18] Boys hopes that this is an expanding field.

These are topics not only relevant for people with a specific interest in, or experience of, disability. To Boys, 'disability history or theory is not about being nice or politically correct'. Instead, starting from disability and difference offers an alternative form of thinking. Once we start seeing the history of architecture from the perspectives of diverse disabled people (always intersected with other marginalised groups) and seek to understand how disability and ability (as well as other stereotyped identities) come to be framed in specific ways rather than others, then we can challenge 'what is normal'. 'One can start from disability and difference to reveal the normative ways in which architecture as a discipline thinks about itself. To me these are all those things that open it out much more widely, in terms of critique, not just around designing better access "solutions", but in unpacking the underlying modes of architectural education and practice that reproduce societal ableism' she explains, before continuing. 'Disability is not just about disability. It's a kind of portal to investigate exclusionary practices more widely. Starting from disability is a critical tool that enables you to explore how people can change the built environment and how different kinds of bodies are imagined, are experimented on, are incorporated in the way that we design, in the ergonomic standards we use and the kinds of access that get built.'

Starting from disability and difference

Aimi Hamraie's book *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability* (2017) has been an important exemplar of this way of thinking.[19] In their book, Hamraie looks at the complex set of circumstances that led to building codes around disability being established but also often distorted, when materialised in regulation and built space. For instance, many of our codes are modelled after US War Veterans who form a very specific group of wheelchair users. As such, building codes modelled after them do not represent a diverse set of bodies. Nor do they account for other disabilities, and people with very different needs, preferences, and desires. More recently, David Gissen – himself a disabled architectural historian and theorist – has started from disability as a critical means to interrogate architectural history and theory itself.[20] Meanwhile Wanda Katja Liebermann's *Architecture's Disability Problem* book focuses on architectural practice.[21]

Starting from difference is not straightforward or easy. For instance, a conflict arises when we talk about rehabilitation. Boys points out that:

> *There are a lot of people I work with who are anxious about a pressure towards a kind of compulsory cure, but then for other conditions, the idea of cure or rehabilitation has real importance. For people who are born with impairments, it is who they are – it doesn't need 'fixing'. Others, who develop a disability later in life for example, may have a more complex relationship with their situation. Personally, I work in a context underpinned by an idea of Disability Pride, that being disabled is just a different way of being which has its own positive qualities. Recognising*

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3. Still from *Architecture Beyond Sight* (2019). A visually impaired student at the Architecture Beyond Sight Summer School, 2019, using power tools to make their projects. Directed by Anna Ulrikke Andersen and produced by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project.

> *these nuances and listening properly to different perspectives is central; part of moving beyond stereotypical binary oppositions between disabled or non-disabled people, or merely sorting disabled people into simplistic functional categories (deaf/blind/wheelchair user), or assuming that there is such a thing as a universal access design solution.*

Boys also wishes to challenge the language we use, finding many common-sense terms problematic:

> *To offer someone access, to include them, to have empathy with them, all assume that you (the one who offers) are doing a good deed, without having to change anything about yourself. Disability activists and scholars are instead using terms such as Disability Justice, which makes power differentials more explicit. That means that non-disabled people need to challenge their own assumptions for things to change, should amplify marginalised voices and experiences, and find ways to act in solidarity.*[22]

For Boys, an important aspect of this approach is that histories that start from disability and difference are necessarily embodied. They involve our bodies and minds, our ways of being, our physicality, sensations, emotions, experiences, relations with others, and interactions with objects and spaces. Although reading – and writing – have perhaps helped Boys delve into what it might mean to fit or misfit, co-creating new ways of doing and thinking disability is essentially a participatory and experiential activity (a central tenet of The DisOrdinary Architecture Project). It is also about campaigning and pushing for change: 'I do think I'm an activist. I think I've always been a design activist without really meaning to', she says. Here, the educational system plays an important role. Beyond reading disability theory and looking at disability arts, both 'doing' and collaborating are key to the approach. What could that mean for the architectural historian?

Other ways of *writing* architectural history

Perhaps we need to explore other ways of *writing* architectural history. When discussing the medium of film, Boys addresses how this technology 'also critiques a kind of sense of what is normal and normative and what gets recorded.' To her, looking at an issue through the lens of a camera affects how a problem, situation or space is interpreted, highlighting how many of our current 'lenses' are limited. For me, this idea is intriguing as it allows me to think and work differently. As I define myself as an architectural historian and filmmaker, I become hopeful and enthusiastic about how new methods can offer new lenses, new ways of seeing, that challenge our narrative of architectural history. Can alternatives to *writing* architectural history itself hold a creative and critical potential particularly well suited to tackle the issues at stake? I believe so.

So, where should we begin? Boys draws attention to our educational system and that it needs challenging. As she says: 'the way you're inculcated through education, whether it's architecture or film or other subjects, shapes the ways in which you talk about the world and describe the world and then the ways that it's carried forward.' If we want to crip[23] the teaching and researching of architectural history, we don't have to start from nothing. We can engage more directly with the best of disability studies scholarship and activism that relates to our discipline, as well as the increasing number of scholars who are developing this work from within architectural history itself.

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Notes

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2 Jos Boys, *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook for Dis/ability, and Designing for Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2014).
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4 Boys, *Doing Disability Differently*; *Disability, Space, Architecture*, ed. by Boys.
5 The DisOrdinary Architecture Project is online at <https://disordinaryarchitecture.co.uk> [accessed 27 June 2024].
6 The film *Architecture Beyond Sight* (2019, 16mm, 17:17) was directed by Anna Ulrikke Andersen and produced by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project.
7 Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, 'Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept', *Hypatia*, 26:3 (2011), 591–609.
8 See, for example: Tanya Titchkosky *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meanin*g (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 1995); Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010); and Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez, *Crip Authorship: Disability as Metho*d (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2023).
9 Jocelyn Dodd, Richard Sandell, Annie Delin, Jackie Gay, *Buried in the Footnotes: The Representation of Disabled People in Museum and Gallery Collections,* Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) (Leicester: University of Leicester, 2004).
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11 The National Disability Arts Collection & Archive is online at <https://the-ndaca.org/> [accessed 27 June 2024].
12 Jos Boys and Zoe Partington, 'Abandoned in the Archives? Collaborating with Disabled People towards More Inclusive Spaces', *Journal of Museum Education*, 47:4 (2022), 442–58.
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22 Sins Invalid, *10 Principles of Disability Justice*, online at <https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/10-principles-of-disability-justice> [accessed 29 June 2024].
23 Crip is used by some disability studies scholars, artists, and activists as a positive noun and verb – reclaiming the derogatory slang for 'cripple' as an expression of disability pride.

Illustration credits

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Biographies

Anna Ulrikke Andersen is an architectural historian and filmmaker working as an Associate Professor of Art History at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology. She is the author of *Following Norberg-Schulz: An Architectural History through the Essay Film* (2022) and leads 'An Architecture of Chronic Illness: A Critical Exploration of Norwegian Buildings and Bodies from Post-War to Post-Pandemic' funded by the Norwegian Research Council 2025–7.

Jos Boys is an independent scholar and co-director of UK-based The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, which brings disabled artists into built environment education and practice to critically and creatively rethink access and inclusion. With a background in architecture, she has also been a journalist, researcher, consultant, educator, photographer, and artist. She has published several books. Jos is currently Guest Professor at the Royal Danish Academy, Copenhagen; and an Honorary Associate Professor in the Knowledge Lab, Institute of Education, UCL.

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