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Empathy

When we published our call for papers for this special issue of *Khōrein* in March 2025, empathy seemed to be under attack from all fronts: only a couple of weeks earlier, Elon Musk, then serving as Senior Advisor to the US President, had described empathy as "the fundamental weakness of Western civilisation," a problematic "bug" that could be "exploited" and "weaponised" against it;[1] at the same time, the UK Government was debating major cuts to the disability benefit bill and plans to reduce the support for pupils with special educational needs; and the broader context of war, mass atrocities and the devastation of civilian life, from Ukraine to Gaza and beyond, did not leave much room for hope.

On the other hand, various designers, historians, and theorists who had deployed empathy to reflect on the embodied imagination of architects or their capacity to forge trust-based relations with diverse communities were also on the receiving end of sustained criticism. Advanced by scholars who work on the intersection of critical disability studies and architecture, such as Wanda Katja Liebermann, this strand of critique questions the validity of putting oneself in another's situation, especially when this involves lived experiences of sensory difference, of bodily and neuro- diversity, or of socially formed subjectivities. Liebermann warns against empathy as a driving force of design practice, noting that it can easily become a thin veil of reasserting architects' authority and spatial expertise over the inaccessible lived experiences of the diverse users of their buildings. This *empathic projection* risks infantilising and rendering

[1] E. Musk, quoted in Z. Wolf, "Elon Musk Wants to Save Western Civilization from Empathy," *CNN News*, 5 March 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2025/03/05/politics/elon-musk-rogan-interview-empathy-doge, (accessed 8 July 2026).

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entire groups and constituencies as incapable of co-shaping the design process, thus disenfranchising their agency—as Jordan Whitewood-Neal also underscores in his book review.

Liebermann's critique is rooted in the way in which empathic projection is employed in the first steps of architectural education. Design briefs encourage students to project themselves into various sites and social contexts, and to approach them almost as extensions of themselves. But this self-sustained immersive practice excludes any form of meaningful interaction with social groups whose embodied interaction with the built environment begs to differ from the students' own. As Liebermann characteristically notes, this "bodily-suppression training means that students struggle even to access and treat their own bodies as a valid reservoir of knowledge,"[2] let alone the variegated lived experiences of disability, deafness and neurodiversity as parallel sources of spatial creativity, aesthetic possibilities, and architectural knowledge production.

In her critique of empathy, Liebermann follows the argument of psychologist Paul Bloom.[3] But similar arguments were to be found in the earlier work of 20th-century philosophers and theorists such as Hannah Arendt, who also favoured rational reflection over sentimental identification like Bloom, or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who famously highlighted the impossibility of empathising with a marginalised group, such as subaltern women, when operating within the power structures of different institutions, languages, and positions of privilege.[4] In a similar vein, Saidiya Hartman has more recently argued that empathic identification can become a form of violence, centring the spectator's feelings over the humanity of the marginalised: "As a consequence," she notes, "empathy fails to expand the space of the other but merely places the self in its stead."[5] Under this light, empathy appears as a culturally and socially embedded practice that typically "sustains the very difference it may seek to overcome,"[6] to conveniently summarise this strand of critique in Sara Ahmed's words.

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[2] W. K. Liebermann, *Architecture's Disability Problem*, Routledge, New York, 2024, p. 67.

[3] See P. Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, The Bodley Head, London, 2016.

[4] See G. C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in C. Nelson and L. Gorssberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Macmillan Education, Basingstoke, 1988, pp. 271–313.

[5] S. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, p. 20.

[6] S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2014, p. 30.

In the course of its centuries-long history in philosophical and architectural discourse, however, empathy has been discussed in more than one, *human* and *non-human*, guises. In earlier, 19th- and 20th-century architectural contexts, *Einfühlung* (empathy) extended from human beings to inanimate objects to inform aesthetic theories of visual form, as in the influential work of art historian Heinrich Wölfflin. This sort of architectural empathy survives in Louis Kahn's well-known address to the brick, which suggests that architects are able to put themselves in the situation not only of their fellow human beings but also of inanimate materials. Empathising with the non-human desires and aspirations of "a common ordinary brick [that] wants to be something more than it is," as Khan asserts, can therefore inform all-too-human designs.[7]

Wölfflin's 19th-century empathy-based aesthetic theory of form became the target of a radical critique by architect, historian, and theorist David Gissen in his recent study *The Architecture of Disability*. Bringing the two ways of addressing empathy in architecture (relating either to embodied differences or inanimate objects) together, his critique additionally indicates that the human and non-human versions of empathy are not necessarily distinct. According to Gissen, Wölfflin's theory suggests that built form is "the invigoration of matter against gravity" and human beings engage aesthetically with it through *physiological empathy*. As such, any formal divergence from symmetry in a building alludes to an analogous disfigurement of the human body which experiences and relates with the building body. "Through this empathetic relationship, one can see and make form represent some sense of human subjecthood," Gissen characteristically concludes.[8] In this special issue, the varying degrees of this human/non-human entanglement form a spectrum for debating the future of empathy, especially in the 21st-century context.

In his review of *The Architecture of Disability*, Michael Faciejew underscores Gissen's own authorial projection on "people like me" as a politically operative "form of collectivization" that underpins the critical and theoretical analyses throughout the book. This authorial stance renders Gissen's personal lived experience with disability as a legitimate basis for "intersubjective" and "decentered" knowledge production in the field of architecture. Working along similar lines, Natalia Pérez Liebergesell

[7] L. Kahn, cited in W. Lesser, *You Say to Brick: The Life of Louis Kahn*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York, 2017, p. 11.

[8] D. Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes beyond Access*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2023, pp. 83, 90.

and Ann Heylighen highlight the significance of embodied relatability as a precondition for the meaningful translation of empathy into specific design action or praxis. The two authors embark from the finding that building codes and universal guidelines for design fail to increase empathy among architects who customarily include accessibility legislation "among the 10 most irritating aspects of their profession." As such, Liebergesell and Heylighen's main question is "how to make information on human diversity accessible for designers" in a meaningful way that would involve empathy and understanding. Despite its well-known problems and critiques, the two authors argue, empathy remains necessary, because, in its absence, designers are not motivated to act in the direction of spatial justice. Since the purpose of abstract rules and universal guidelines is frequently unclear, such generic principles are typically perceived as straitjackets to architects' creativity. Hence, for Liebergesell and Heylighen, empathy becomes a prerequisite for re-humanising the common ground of embodiment, including the specific bodily needs and lived experiences, from which technical rules and guidelines stem in the first place.

Like Liebergesell and Heylighen, Melike Beşik and Bihter Almaç also respond to the critique of empathy as a practice that "sustains the very difference it may seek to overcome," when it is reduced to simulating somebody else's experience. While Liebergesell and Heylighen work with "resonant" commonalities as a way to arrive at "shared experiences of disablement on the basis of individual embodiment," however, Beşik and Almaç work in the opposite direction. They aim to maintain the "ungraspability" of the other, especially in contested contexts that entail power asymmetries between the active authority of the empathiser and the passive transparency of the empathised. Their proposed "spatial attunement" renders drawing as a means of maintaining a relation which remains partially opaque and irreducible to a full understanding. Instead of fully exposing its subject matter, the specific practice of architectural drawing explored by Beşik and Almaç negotiates the terms and conditions under which exposure (and its counterpart, concealment) become possible and negotiable in the first place.

The same critique of empathy additionally informs Ela Egidy and Hélène Frichot's attempt to relinquish empathy from its potential implications of control, in order to unleash its untapped potential for an open-ended encounter with unpredictable end results. Their proposed "surface empathy," which "happens in the contact zone between a body and a material that operates according to its own logic, its own temporality,

and its own affective capacity to exceed whatever container attempts to hold and constrain it," evokes historical empathic engagements that link the human with the non-human – this time, across much wider spatial and temporal spans. Through practising surface empathy, the two authors attempt to retrieve the lived experience and "material labour practices of women from nearly 500 years ago, cordoned off in the gendered enclosure of a convent." In this context, a material experiment in the 21st century serves as a potential bridge that connects the two authors with the embodied experience of convertite book makers five centuries in the past. The specific background of the author-researcher—who is also a typographer engaging with practices of making—plays a key role in setting the process of surface empathy in motion: this shared background of tacit knowledge is a prerequisite for the book page to serve as the contact zone across space and time, since material labour, embodied experiences, and situated knowledges coalesce in the typographic practices and processes of making of both 16th- and 21st-century women. As such, Egidy and Frichot's surface empathy does not necessarily reside in or originate from specific subjects or objects; rather, it challenges such simplistic boundaries, lying instead in the unstable relational conditions and potential encounters between affordances of matter-flows that are enabled by surfaces.

A close engagement with the non-human returns in Nerea Amorós Elorduy's article, this time as a response to the perceived shortcomings of empathy as a human-centric practice that cannot address 21st-century challenges which also involve geographic and climatic factors. Based on her long-standing work in seven refugee camps in East Africa, Amorós Elorduy critically observes that architects' supposedly empathic design processes are frequently short-lived or serve only for the purpose of knowledge extraction (as in the case of 10-day participatory workshops with a community, which is then abandoned by the designers who proceed to do the work as they understand it without giving back to said community). Evidently, such practices cannot account for the complex nexus of human and non-human actors and factors that are implicated in the 21st-century agendas of environmental and spatial justice. In this context, empathic design practices are equally limited by their exclusive association with human subjectivity which precludes an architect's engagement with the non-human processes that sit at the heart of our present predicament. Amorós Elorduy's proposed alternative—"situated empathy" or "relational attentiveness"—is instead characterised by an interdisciplinary "ability to recognise and engage with the networks

of relations through which spatial environments are produced" that rests on collective processes of knowledge production. In this context, empathy is no longer an individual act but a collective and collaborative epistemic practice of distributed agency between human and non-human actors and networks, including "the ecological, material and historical conditions that shape spatial life" and their own "behaviours, affordances, and effects."

What unites the above critical responses to the (entangled) human and non-human sides of empathy is a conviction that there is a future for it in the 21st century. As such, these articles chime with Liebermann: despite advancing one of empathy's sharpest critiques, even she notes that "a critical projection into another's experience *could* serve as a starting point for imagining potential users' sensory and spatial experience."[9] She proposes the Ed Roberts Campus by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects as a positive example of empathy in design. Her account of this project and the radical participatory design process that underpins it shows that empathy does not come first; it can work only if it is based on a lived experience of direct engagement with another's different bodily/sensory engagement with space.[10]

In their article, Nina Vollenbröker, Kerstin Sailer, and Jos Boys, in collaboration with the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, further advance the argument that empathy needs to be maintained as a method of staying with this difference. In its absence, the consideration of diverse bodyminds and their intersections with the built environment is reduced to the simplistic terms of ensuring access, a single problem of convenient circulation that needs to be fixed. But this approach flattens any meaningful differences in the diverse spatial experiences and embodied knowledges whose complexity enriches one's understanding of the full spectrum of the human condition, including the spatial creative practices and implications that might ensue from them. By contrast, when it is employed as a method of sustaining solidarity with the different bodyminds that use and imagine architectural spaces, empathy also becomes a way to do justice to disabled spatial knowledges, experiences, and creative imaginaries. Using empathy as method, the authors identify several spatial inequities and disparities in meeting the access needs of diverse bodyminds in an officially "accessible" refurbished building. This leads

[9] W. K. Liebermann, *Architecture's Disability Problem*, p. 67. Emphasis in the original.
[10] *Ibid*., p. 100.

the authors to conclude that the real problem lies in the distribution of power within systemic and institutional structures through which such differentials remain unaddressed.

Working in the bigger picture of this direction, historians of disability such as David Serlin have positively employed notions of empathy to argue for a distinct variety of modernism that developed in parallel with its more well-known didactic (i.e. normative) variant in the 20th century. Moving away from empathic projection and its discontents, Serlin focuses on retrieving histories of modernist architects' *empathic relationships* with different communities.[11] In this context, empathy becomes another lens through which established understandings of architectural movements (such as those of modernism and postmodernism) appear as reductive. Building on this recent work, in his article for this special issue, Serlin presents Giuseppe Quaroni and Marcello Piacentini's *Il Progetto Ophelia*, an asylum project in Benito Mussolini's Italy, as "a potent example of architecture's capacity to embody multiple and often contradictory forms of modernity." His focus is now more clearly on the *emotional circuitry that forges an empathic bond* between architect and user. While Vollenbröker and her co-authors use empathy as a method that goes hand in hand with solidarity to negotiate diverse embodiments and their intersections with the built environment, Serlin's longer-term purview shows how such design negotiations unfolded historically. His study underscores how disabled people were indeed conducive to the development of "dialectical forms of architectural empathy" in all their roles as "subjects," "objects," or "mediums" of the related design practices.

For Serlin, then, empathy becomes a prerequisite for igniting the processes of co-design. In this context, empathy does not operate in the selfsame terms of a closed individual circuit, where one sees only oneself projected on the mirror of another's experience. Rather, empathy holds transformative potential, because the key to the whole process is bi-directional reciprocity. This mutuality makes all the difference between practising empathy *for* rather than *with* others, as Serlin helpfully notes. When discussing *Il Progetto Ophelia*, he proposes a useful distinction between a practice that uses the structures of empathy instrumentally rather than really exercising it to transgress its conventional adoption as a euphemism for inclusivity. Adopting this second approach to empathy

[11] D. Serlin, *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2025.

in architectural design practice enables one to address deeper structural imbalances, embedded hierarchies, and power asymmetries that render the architect as the subject who designs and the intended recipient as an instrumentalised object that can only be mastered and controlled by the architect's design practice and expertise.

If Egidy and Frichot's surface empathy challenges conventional distinctions between human subjects and inanimate objects, Serlin therefore proposes another way in which human empathising can also break down the closed system of dichotomies between (architect-) subjects and (recipient-) objects. He outlines an open system of flat hierarchies, of designs that are mutually co-produced by architects and recipients motivated to act on their recognition of and identification with somebody else and their suffering. The empathy-and-solidarity schema that Vollenbröker and her co-authors foreground in their article therefore finds its further theoretical elaboration in Serlin's work, which outlines how it all becomes possible in practice. As Serlin notes, the crucial question is how one wants to see the world transforming after identifying with another's experience: do they aim to alleviate suffering by building a shared and equitable world or do they only attempt to reinforce this suffering alongside their superior position in power hierarchies? In his interview with *Khōrein*, Eduardo Souto de Moura further underscores the stance towards the collective as an architect's fundamental responsibility.

A clear example of Serlin's instrumentalised empathy, which only applies its structures superficially without really exercising it to transform oneself, is provided by the response that Andri Gerber and Elena Gavagnin receive from ChatGPT-4o when they first prompt it to reflect on its capacity for architectural empathy: "Artificial intelligence has no empathy, because it has no subjective experience. [...] AI can simulate empathy—e.g., saying 'I'm sorry you're going through that'—but this is learned from patterns in language, not from genuine care." The two authors' thought and practical experiments with AI's capacity for architectural empathy, given its disembodied connection to the physical world, showed that AI's related capacities are at present restricted to "assembling" and "collating the description of several static places" to turn it into "a journey through these;" in practice, AI cannot yet take another physical position literally, let alone walk in the shoes of another subjectivity metaphorically, in the same three-dimensional space.

In his interview with *Khōrein*, Nicolas Bourriaud further underscores the perils behind the current tendency to empathise with AI in the same

way that human subjecthood has previously fetishised other inanimate objects by projecting its all too human feelings on to them. If the political sphere is to survive the introduction of this fetishised AI and its instrumentalised "machine to human" relations, Bourriaud contends, human agency needs to be reclaimed within an alternative "human and others" system of relations. This seems to be the only way to sustain the relational field that is necessary for responding afresh to the recurring fundamental question of politics: namely, how to live together.

A year and a half after the publication of our call for this special issue of *Khōrein*, empathy remains under attack. The world has additionally witnessed the deployment of the "automatised deadly weapons," against which Bourriaud warns, in the recent bombardments of Iran. Over the past months, debates around introducing age-based social media bans in the UK and other countries have also highlighted how these platforms severely hamper children and young people's ability to relate to the community around them: "instead of truly being 'with the other,' they remain with themselves," as Susanne Schmetkamp characteristically mentions in her interview with *Khōrein*. Indeed, the publication of this issue virtually coincides with the release of the "instant #1 *New York Times* bestseller" *Suicidal Empathy: Dying to Be Kind* by Gad Saad.[12] Like his earlier writings that influenced Musk's position on this topic, this recent book is also endorsed by the world's first trillionaire as an account of "the core weakness" of Western civilisation, which is apparently "doomed" if empathy is left unaddressed. Amorós Elorduy's conclusion suggests that diminishing funding practices, alongside the priorities and expectations for research outputs and findings that can become universally applicable as a standard set of architectural tools and practices, already do not encourage nuanced and long-term empathic approaches. Schmetkamp also underscores the problematic wider framework of neoliberal capitalism that promotes short-term growth at all costs and unwavering individual self-optimisation. In such a hostile context that constantly reinforces similar assumptions, this special issue of *Khōrein* shows instead why empathy might now be more relevant than ever. Resisting the tendency to instrumentalise it by paying lip service to its structures instead of really practising empathy to transform ourselves is the only way to share the more inclusive world that human and non-human beings deserve.

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[12] G. Saad, *Suicidal Empathy: Dying to Be Kind*, HarperCollins, New York, 2026.

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