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“THIS SPACE IS AN ECLECTIC POLYGLOT”: REVIEWING AN ARCHITECTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION THROUGH DIVERSE EYES, EARS, AND MINDS

ABSTRACT: This article pivots around a recently renovated university building in central London. Rooted in a participatory, multimodal, creative-led methodology, the research is based on a study carried out in the summer of 2025, when eight disabled artists, designers, and architects visited the building and recorded their experiences in a variety of media. Given that universities have been identified as highly exclusive environments—both spatially and socially—the paper uses empathy as a lens through which to scrutinise the many ways in which architecture shapes who accesses, who freely navigates, who shapes, and, ultimately, who belongs in the spaces of academia. Working with empathy not as *feeling-for* but as *solidarity-with*, the article aims to destabilise dominant understandings of disability and their framing through the built environment.

KEYWORDS: empathy, disability, Deafness, architecture, higher education, participatory research, spatial justice

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INTRODUCTION: EMPATHY AS A PHILOSOPHICAL-ARCHITECTURAL LENS TO DESTABILISE DOMINANT UNDERSTANDINGS OF DISABILITY

“[T]he university [...] holds a history of injustice in its architecture,” critical disability scholar Jay Dolmage proposes, arguing that academic “spaces and institutions cannot be disconnected from [...] the bodies they selectively exclude.”¹ Dolmage’s message chimes with a steadily growing body of contemporary scholarship that addresses architecture’s long-standing exclusionary powers and deep imbrication with inequity. Together, these publications have mapped out the complicity of buildings, cities, and planning systems in the organisation, control, and segregation of populations and detailed how architecture produces, maintains, and reinforces unequal power relations.² While most of these important scholarly investigations have exposed power relations around gender, race, and architecture, the focus of Dolmage’s work is on disability—a topic which, according to architectural and urban historian Wanda Katja Lieberman, “in architecture is still often left out of discussions about social equity.”³

Dolmage grounds his argument by invoking the *steep steps of the architectural typology scrutinised by his research*: university campuses. Entering a university building, he argues, has traditionally meant a long ceremonial ascent: many established campuses are located on a hill, feature lengthy approaches, and include raised formal entrances reached by elaborate staircases. As such, their environments are unforgiving to bodies that move slowly, unpredictably, or with pain and designed without consideration for fatigue, chronic illness, or sensory difference. Dolmage uses

¹ J. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2017, p. 9.

² J. Rendell, B. Penner, I. Borden (eds.), *Gender Space Architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Routledge, London, 2000; I. Cheng, C. L. Davis, M. O. Wilson (eds.), *Race and Modern Architecture: A Critical History from the Enlightenment to the Present*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, 2020; A. Muchechei, *Whiteness, Space, and the Architecture of Exclusion*, Routledge, London, 2026.

³ W. K. Liebermann, *Architecture’s Disability Problem*, Routledge, Abingdon, 2024, p. 3. For recent publications in the field, see: D. Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes Beyond Access*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2022; S. Giamarelos, N. Vollenbröker (eds.), *arg: Architectural Research Quarterly: Architectures of Deafness, Disability, and Neurodiversity*, 28, 3, 2024; D. Serlin, *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2025; N. Vollenbröker, “Deafening Architectural Modernism: Reconsidering the Archive of Adolf Loos,” in *Crippling the Archive: Disability, History, and Power*, J. L. Barclay, S. Hunt-Kennedy (eds.), University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2025.

these *steep steps* to unpack how higher education is intentionally built to privilege certain bodies and minds while excluding others from scholarly communities, both spatially and socially.

Dolmage’s argument brings together two things—“an *architecture* in which ableism has an incredibly powerful hold” and “*higher education*, the location so powerfully responsible for the suppression of disabled people”—thus identifying architecture and the academy as doing ableist work together, historically, but also today.⁴ With the obvious steep steps now all but addressed (by retro-fitting ramps and back entrances), other architectural elements continuing to enforce inequality and exclusion remain unconsidered (including that disabled students are expected to accept separate or inferior access, navigate bureaucratic processes, and behave as their non-disabled peers). Essentially, Dolmage concludes, disability has become an *individual problem* in academia, erased from *collective responsibility*.⁵

Addressing this erasure of disability from collective concern, especially in the context of academia, design justice activist and communications scholar Sasha Costanza-Chock writes: diverse “forms of structural inequality are always active in educational environments [...] [W]e don’t want to ‘erase’ differences or pretend that they do not exist.” As such, they propose, it is important for educational spaces to hold “two goals in balance—to break down barriers and create a space of mutual *empathy and solidarity* while recognizing and respecting the validity of different standpoints and life experiences.”⁶

Empathy might, indeed, be a compelling modality through which to highlight and problematise the erasure of disabled perspectives from accepted understandings of campus architecture. It is important to remember that the concept of empathy has, for many disability studies scholars and activists, problematic connotations—especially because even a well-intentioned non-disabled empathy can blur into pity, condescending behaviours, or the viewing of disabled people’s lives as tragedy or inspiration. Writers including Sara Ahmed, Saidiya Hartman, Eva Feder Kittay, and Tobin Siebers have shown that empathy is shaped by social power, often rests on incomplete knowledge of others, can reproduce inequalities,

⁴ J. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism: Disability and Higher Education*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2017, p. 6. Emphasis added.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ S. Costanza-Chock, *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2020, pp. 196–197. Emphasis added.

and may—through the erasure of the specific subjectivity of an individual by attempt to ‘step into the skin of the other’—even constitute a form of violence.⁷ As such, this article works with empathy not as *feeling-for* but as *solidarity-with* and uses empathy as a lens to ask: now that much of the built environment claims accessibility compliance, what architectural complexities, what standpoints and experiences, what ongoing exclusions are we—collectively—looking away from? What is the architectural and social loss? How can these standpoints and experiences be made visible, impactful, and transformative? How might empathy serve to destabilise dominant understandings of disability? In this context, then, empathy is understood as a means to develop solidarity with disabled people as ordinary, complex individuals and a shared belief in social and spatial justice. It is not understood as feeling for a marginalised ‘other.’

Empathy as Method

Empathy has persisted as a significant concept within architectural theory, with its understandings and definitions remaining in flux for many decades. Discussions of the notion of empathy—*Einfühlung* in German, the act of “feeling into” other lives, events, and objects—stretch from early considerations by Rudolf Hermann Lotze (1817-1881), Robert Vischer (1847-1933), and Theodor Lipps (1851–1914), to Heinrich Wölfflin (1864-1945) and August Schmarsow (1853-1936) who correlated architectural reception to the idea of empathy, and to contemporary theorists and architects Harry Francis Mallgrave, Juhani Pallasmaa, Helena Sandman, and Kirsten Wagner.⁸ In architecture, most discussions

⁷ S. Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Routledge, Milton, 2014; E. F. Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2019; T. Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010; S. V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 2022.

⁸ R. H. Lotze, *Mikrokosmos. Ideen zur Naturgeschichte und Geschichte der Menschheit* [1858], S. Hirzel, Leipzig, 1885; R. Vischer, *Über das optische Formgefühl. Ein Beitrag zur Aesthetik*, Hermann Credner, Leipzig, 1873; T. Lipps, “Einfühlung und ästhetischer Genuß,” *Die Zukunft*, 54, 14, pp. 100–114; H. Wölfflin, “Prolegomena to a Psychology of Architecture,” in R. Vischer, H. F. Mallgrave, E. Ikonomidou (eds.), *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics*, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1993, pp. 149–192; A. Schmarsow, “Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung,” in J. Dünne, S. Günzel (eds.), *Raumtheorie: Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 2006, pp. 470–484; H. F. Mallgrave, E. Ikonomidou, “Introduction,” in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics*, Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, Los Angeles, 1993; H. Sandman,

around empathy, however, are still to fully acknowledge diverse embodiment as foundational to spatial thinking, and to thus support the reshaping of language, education, and design processes so that architecture no longer assumes a single normate body.⁹

Working in this neglected direction, this article uses empathy—“recognizing and respecting the validity of different standpoints and life experiences” in the words of Costanza-Chock—as a lens to foreground those modes of being in, relating to, and knowing architecture which remain under-considered by a profession still largely aiming at minimal legislative compliance rather than spatial justice. It builds on Dolmage’s considerations of academia and on those important projects that have reviewed the accessibility of higher education’s built environments.¹⁰ It also draws on Costanza-Chock’s warning that a focus on access risks *erasing* diversity rather than empathically learning from it and on complementary insights developed by scholars and disability action groups including: Lennard J. Davis’s critique of architecture’s longstanding reiteration of non-disabled defaults;¹¹ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s concept of *misfitting* as a diagnostic tool and opportunity for redesign;¹² H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, who reframe hearing loss as *Deaf Gain* and thus as a *valuable* way of experiencing and authoring space;¹³ Jos Boys’s calls for designing from disability and her appeal to “rethink disability as a creative generator for architectural designers”¹⁴; Charlotte

T. Meguid, J. Levänen, “Unboxing empathy: reflecting on architectural design for maternal health,” *CoDesign*, 18, 2, 2022, pp. 260–278; J. Pallasmaa, “Empathic Imagination,” lecture at Bengal Architecture Symposium, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Js8EjvXiDU, (accessed 16 March 2026); K. Wagner, J. Blower, “Animating Architecture: Empathy and Architectonic Space,” *Art in Translation*, 6, 4, 2014, pp. 399–435

⁹ David Gissen relates empathy, architecture, and disability in his chapter ‘A Form of Impairment’ in D. Gissen, *The Architecture of Disability: Buildings, Cities, and Landscapes Beyond Access*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2022.

¹⁰ A. Vaughn, “Accessibility Auditing: Four Case Studies,” *Critical Planning*, 28, 1, 2025, pp. 39–68; A. Hamraie, *Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Disability*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2017; A. Hamraie, “(Ir)Resistible Stairs: Public Health, Desiring Practices, and Material-Symbolic Ableism,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 76, 1, 2022, pp. 49–59.

¹¹ L. J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body*, Verso, London, 1995.

¹² R. Garland-Thomson, “Misfits: A Feminist Materialist Disability Concept,” *Hypatia* 26, 3, 2011, pp. 591–609.

¹³ H. Dirksen, L. Bauman, J. J. Murray (eds.), *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2014.

¹⁴ J. Boys, *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Architecture, Disability and Designing for Everyday Life*, Routledge, London, 2014; J. Boys, M. Kajita,

Bates and Rob Imrie, who introduce an ethic of care into architecture and design¹⁵; and Sins Invalid's affirmation that we must "honor the insights and participation of all of our [disabled] community members."¹⁶

The article is rooted in research which took place during the summer of 2025, when we welcomed eight artists, designers, and architects living with diverse disabilities to University College London's Bartlett School of Architecture, where all three authors work or have worked. The building was originally completed in the 1970s and it underwent a deep retrofit and extension in 2016. The renovation retained the existing concrete structure but fundamentally re-thought the organisation of space and programme. The building now features a double-height entrance foyer and exhibition area with a glazed façade to the main street. A large, open stairwell connecting all eight floors forms the heart of the interior space, its wide timber steps and generous landings designed for impromptu social interaction and affording sweeping views through the interior space. Radiating away from this centrepiece are large, semi-enclosed breakout areas (used for exhibitions, tutorials, design reviews, and social gatherings), enclosed seminar rooms (for meetings and small-group teaching), and open studios (providing student workspaces) to the south and west as well as small and enclosed academic and administrative offices to the north and east (see Figure 1).

The eight co-researcher participants have diverse profiles regarding their age, gender, race, and co-occurring conditions but, for the purpose of this study, were understood as representing four groups: wheelchair-users (Jordan Whitewood-Neal and Jess Thom), blind people (Mandy Redvers-Rowe and David Johnson), Deaf sign-language-users (Coco Briden and Chris Laing), and three individuals identifying as neurodivergent (Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa, Natasha Trotman, and Jess Thom).¹⁷ As is frequently the case, these 'categories' overlapped, so that responses often went beyond the assumed access needs for any particular

"Exploring Disability as a Creative and Critical Challenge to Design Norms," in M. Mostafa *et al.* (eds.), *Design for Inclusivity: Proceedings of the UIA World Congress of Architects Copenhagen 2023*, Springer, Cham, 2023, pp. 195–203.

¹⁵ C. Bates, R. Imrie, K. Kullman (eds.), *Care and Design: Bodies, Buildings, Cities*, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken, 2017.

¹⁶ Sins Invalid, "10 Principles of Disability Justice," <https://sinsinvalid.org/10-principles-of-disability-justice/> (accessed 13 February 2026).

¹⁷ Participants were recruited through The DisOrdinary Architecture Project. They received a fee for their work and travel expenses were compensated. This article was shared with all participants for comments before submission.

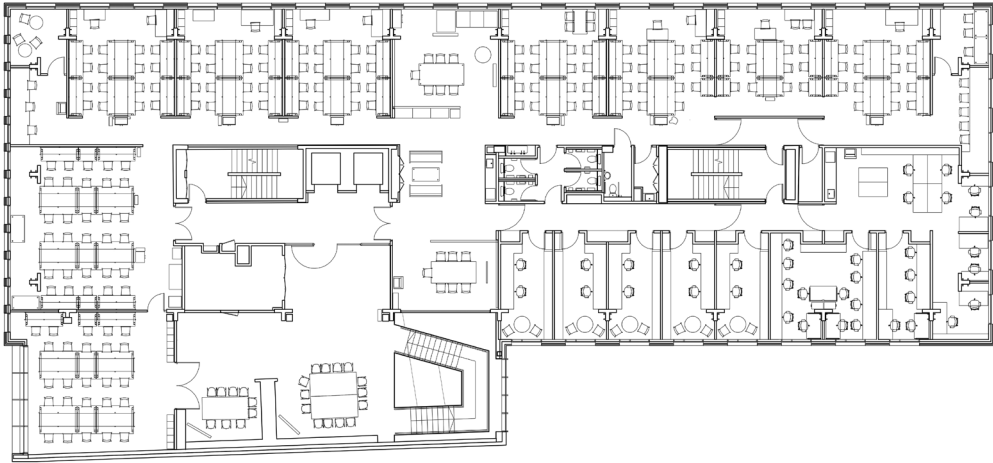


Figure 1: Second-floor plan of the Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London. Drawing by Mine Sak-Acur.

impairment group. Participants were asked to tour the building and record their experiences. In line with the study's aim to understand their lived experience, we suggested a series of areas of the building for evaluation and provided a small set of questions and prompts for participants to respond to. Ultimately, each individual contributor determined which spaces and topics they were going to address, and the method of recording their journeys through the building was left up to them. This approach afforded our collaborating creatives the opportunity to curate their own journey and articulate their experiences openly, encouraging the exploration of issues they regarded as significant. As such, it allowed for the integration of personal, emotional, and possibly unexpected dimensions into the study and facilitated a more nuanced understanding of individual perspectives. Participants spent between two and four hours in the building; four individuals went through the building by themselves, two individuals explored it as a pair, and another group of two individuals was accompanied by one of the authors. They all mapped their experiences of navigating this building through a range of different media: audio-descriptions, text, drawings, collages, photographs, and films. This rich material was then presented and discussed by contributors and authors in a workshop two weeks later. In a next step, the authors analysed the participants' visual, aural, and textual narratives as well as the workshop recordings. While in this article, some accounts have crystallised as anchor points while others have taken on the role of illuminate adjacent themes, it is important to emphasise that analytical attention and interpretive treatment were given to all participating creatives, and that the argument and structural logic of the article was shaped equally by all contributions. All participant quotes in this article are drawn from building explorations and a follow-up workshop and used with permission.

What follows are three sections, loosely related to the various journeys participants took through the building. The sections do not map onto a particular space or architectural feature; instead, they are guided by three themes which emerged between the contributors' accounts. Section 1 ("Care and Consideration: Being Expected") generally focuses on entering the building, on initial impressions, and on feeling welcome in its space; section 2 ("Circulation and Orientation: The Cost of Getting Lost") moves deeper into the building, thinks about wayfinding and spatial connection, and asks what movements and energy levels are considered legitimate; section 3 ("Independence and Interdependence: Taking Up Space") considers a selection of individual spaces, the processes of

laying claim to them, and the importance of thoughtful architectural inhabitation. Overall, the article aims to destabilise the still dominant understandings of disability as “the exception to the rule,” “disruptive,” a “worst case scenario”—as foregrounded by disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky—instead centring bodily variability as a “way of perceiving” space and “sense making device” giving valuable insights.¹⁸ As such, the conclusion reflects on the overlaps and tensions between individual experiences, asking how these might inform alternative architectural practices and allow us to think empathetically about *all bodies* in the built environment.

CARE AND CONSIDERATION: BEING EXPECTED

“Buildings have an overall message: do I belong—or not? Do I feel welcome—or not?”¹⁹

Finding one’s way into the Bartlett School of Architecture is not necessarily straightforward. The main door is tucked away in a recess of the building’s façade onto Gordon Street and, for visitors arriving from the nearby station and main road, can only be seen once you have already walked past it. The door is a solid timber structure with no glass panels, and the automatic swing door opener, as one participant noted, is not always reliable.²⁰ Still, large windows allow approaching visitors to get glimpses of the ground-floor gallery and café space from the rest of the street, and the initial feeling upon entering the building was one of generosity and openness – the entrance area is spacious and filled with daylight, the chatter of students, and the smell of coffee: “I enjoy the openness of the ground floor layout it entitles the visitor to enter. Upon arrival, one is welcomed into the space with some words by students. You are also welcomed into your space with the small canteen [café].”²¹

One of the Deaf participants noted that the ground floor “has a lovely eye-line view, and you can see different directions.”²² To move from the entrance area and further into the building, visitors pass through a set of automated barriers. These were an initial concern for a wheelchair user,

¹⁸ T. Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2011, pp. 9–47.

¹⁹ David Johnson.

²⁰ Natasha Trotman.

²¹ Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa.

²² Coco Briden.



Figures 2 (left) and 3 (right). Eight disabled artists, designers, and architects explored the building and responded in their selected medium. Left photograph by Jess Thom, right photograph by Natasha Trotman.



who noted her “residual anxiety that automatic gates are not set up for the time I need to move through them,” but proved negotiable with ease when the Community Manager, resident at the adjacent reception desk, kept them unlocked.²³ The presence of the Community Manager was also lauded by one of the blind participants: “[T]he fact that there’s a person on the barrier makes a huge difference because in that situation, a vision-impaired person can ask for direction or support if they’re meeting someone.”²⁴

The imposing staircase—a large, zig-zagging structure with solid metal sides and wide oak treads, back-lit by an multiple-storey glazed façade, suspended in a huge void spanning across eight storeys, and located in a central position—is visible immediately upon entering the building. Moving closer, the staircase affords vertical views throughout the entire building—from the sixth floor at the top to the workshop in the basement. These long lines of sight were pointed out as being helpful since, from the beginning of their visit, they allowed sighted contributors to get a sense of the space and to consider what navigating the building would entail. The two blind participants also commented positively on the staircase: the amount of daylight entering from the extensive glazing behind give someone with remaining vision a sense of orientation, and the treads have a predictability to them: “I look for patterns or repetition [...] [between the ground and the first floor, there is] one flight, 180-degree turn, the second flight, then 90 degrees to the third flight, and then up to the landing [...] it is that regularity I look for, that repetition.” This predictable repetition between floors is supported by a continuous handrail which follows the angle of the stairs—“the railing is a very good railing.”²⁵

The staircase was similarly positively reviewed by the Deaf participants. “I think this space is good,” one contributor noted, focusing on the views the stairwell affords deep into the building and across the floors, “when I come down the stairs, I can see different areas.” The central stairs thus give an excellent understanding of the building’s structural logic and an overview of what is going on. In addition, she pointed out that the staircase’s slope, layout, and open nature meant someone walking down can see individuals going up and vice versa; these clear sight lines prevent

²³ Jess Thom.

²⁴ Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

²⁵ Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

people bumping into each other. (In contrast, the lift felt cramped, problematically lit, and disconnected—as will be detailed later).

While Deaf and blind individuals credited the open layout and large stairwell with providing visitors with a good grasp of the building’s structural logic and events, participants also raised concerns about the open plan: the blaring aircon units, incessant humming and loud buzzy bursts of the commercial espresso machine, and ever-present casual conversation ricocheting vertically though the building were all quickly commented on. “The *unpredictability* of the noises makes this not a space I want to stay in,” one participant noted, while another foregrounded the *intensity* of the noise—up to 90 decibels, a level which “drowned out quite a lot of [what] was important to hear, like what people were saying.”²⁶ (See Figure 3)

“You can’t unhear it, can you?,” a blind contributor reflected on what she described as an *enormous soundscape*. “I can never unhear it, no,” the other agreed, explaining that while sighted individuals, concentrating on a visual feature—the face of a conversation partner, the gestures of a lecturer, the slide show on a monitor—may be able to block out some of the distracting noise, partially sighted individuals cannot shift their attention away from peripheral sounds.²⁷ On one of the landings—a generous, open-plan area immediately next to the central staircase which is central to the building, which exists on each floor, and where key events like design reviews, tutorials, and seminar teaching happen—a poignant topic began to emerge. Taking in the space for a short moment, one of our blind participants concluded: “I think if I was a *student* here, I would find it a little bit difficult to concentrate on my particular group.”

Others similarly shifted their position—from *building visitor* to *student*—and agreed. Reflecting on the landings, one creative noted: “[T]his space, Deaf people wouldn’t use. A hard-of-hearing person like myself—I wouldn’t use it for in-depth meetings [...] because I can hear noise from downstairs. If I had someone talk to me here, I would probably struggle because of the noise.”²⁸ In parallel to the cacophony of sounds across all levels of the building, strong smells and high levels of artificial lighting were also observed as drifting through the building, leading to “a real risk of sensory overload,” especially for those with

²⁶ Jess Thom, David Johnson.

²⁷ David Johnson, then Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

²⁸ Coco Briden.

heightened sensory sensitivity, which would also detract from their ability to study and learn.²⁹

It began to emerge that, while the building was initially accessible for disabled *visitors*, it did not imagine blind, Deaf, or neurodivergent *students*. An error of judgement, as one participant poignantly details, since not catering for disability amongst this younger group can have serious implications:

You've got to be careful, because even if you've got a bunch of younger people [...] [some will be] partially sighted people who haven't got used to the idea or don't want to get used to the idea [...] I used to hate my cane. I took about ten years to summon up the courage to use it. I was 28 before I did that [...] I was registered blind and went to university and wouldn't use my stick. You want to be like others, don't you? You want to be like everyone else. I just walked into everyone, fell downstairs and everything [...] Statistically, I bet there are a few people at this college [...] [with] a visual impairment that they're not telling you about or haven't come to terms with yet.³⁰

Wandering away from the entrance, central stairs, and multi-purpose landings and into the corridors behind, dissonances between the bodies and minds imagined to study in the building and the bodies and minds of the contributors began to become more and more apparent. Across four floors, the building's design studio spaces align along the north side of the building, furnished with allocated workstations. Rows of desks face each other, separated by high-level shelves. These central storage components would be problematic for Deaf students (whose line of vision is blocked by them, meaning they would not be able to communicate using sign language) as well as for wheelchair users (who cannot access the shelving). There is also limited turning space for wheelchairs between the desk rows. "These are studios that I would struggle to move around," one wheelchair user concluded, noting that the opposing side of the building, where staff offices are lined up along a corridor, is not much better: "If I was waiting for a tutorial here, I would be blocking the space."³¹

In teaching rooms, lecterns were installed in front of windows, meaning a Deaf student will likely struggle read lip patterns or signed

²⁹ Natasha Trotman.

³⁰ David Johnson.

³¹ Jess Thom.

interpretation: “It would be difficult to see [a lecturer’s face or an interpreter’s signing] because of the bright light behind them and it would be tiring to watch them. It wouldn’t work. This space is not working.”³² In seminar spaces, seating is installed on either side of a rectangular meeting table: “Look at this table. Is this designed for Deaf people? Not really. It needs to be circular, because for example, if I have an interpreter here [opposite], it’s fine [...]. But imagine if there’s another Deaf person sitting next to me. How would I be able to follow the conversation on the side? I’d have to bend over and look [...].”³³ (See Figure 4)

This raises the question of not just *whether* but *how many* students with a disability might be envisaged to occupy this university building—a point also made by participants using a wheelchair. Some circulation areas, while comfortably accommodating one person in a wheelchair, only allowed for two wheelchair users to pass after some manoeuvring (see Figure 2). Teaching spaces, like seminar rooms, were more capacious but specified maximum occupancy at their doors. “If a room’s capacity is 80, does that mean 80 of me, with my chair, and my PA, and all of the things that go with me?,” one contributor asked, “Or does it mean 80 of a non-disabled person? Whose body and mind has been utilised as a basis of this calculation?”³⁴

Circling back to empathy as an architectural lens, then, and bringing a diversity of *bodyminds* to bear on understandings of space shows that some kinds of people are expected in this building and not others.³⁵

Queer theorist Susan Stryker frames spaces as “imaginaries” that configure “who is or is not thought to be among those who will enter or occupy those spaces.”³⁶ *Entering* the majority of the spaces within this higher education building was relatively successful. “Buildings have an overall message: do I belong—or not? Do I feel welcome—or not?,” one of the

³² Coco Briden.

³³ Chris Laing.

³⁴ Jess Thom.

³⁵ The term *bodyminds* underscores that body and mind are co-constitutive, and disability should be understood as affecting the whole person, not just either the body or the mind. As Margaret Price puts it, “because mental and physical processes not only affect each other but also give rise to each other—that is, because they tend to act as one, even though they are conventionally understood as two—it makes more sense to refer to them together, in a single term.” M. Price, “The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia*, 30, 1, 2015, p. 269.

³⁶ T. Southcott, D. Theodore, “Interview with Susan Stryker,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 74, 2, 2020, pp. 333–336.

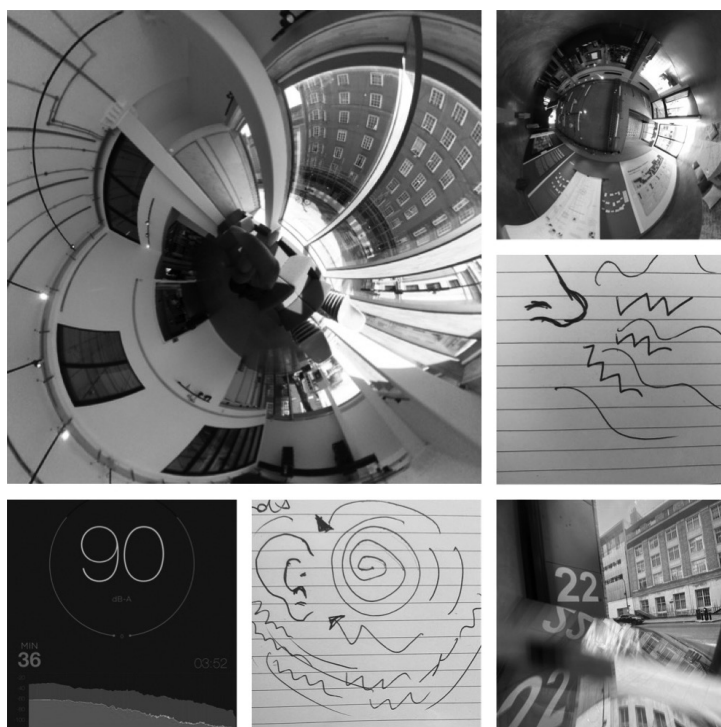


Figure 4. Strong smells, bright lights, and sound levels of 90 decibels. Collage by Natasha Trotman.

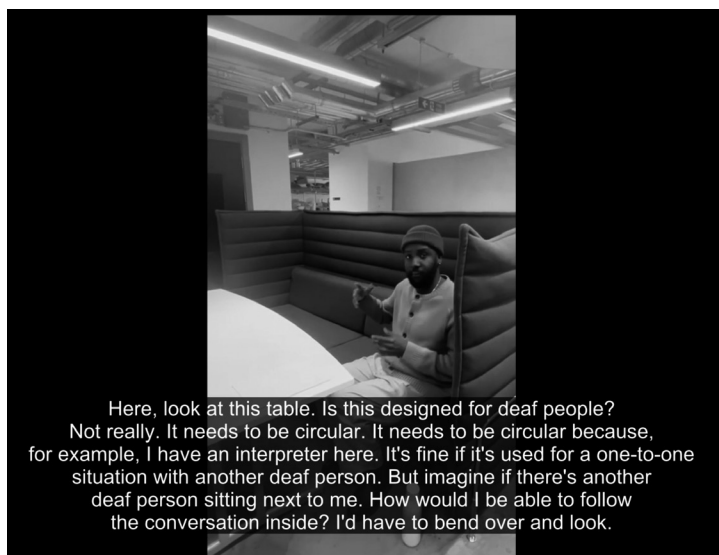


Figure 5. How many Deaf students does this building expect? Film still by Coco Briden and Chris Laing.

blind participants poignantly stated.³⁷ If, after a couple of initial visits, he does not feel expected and welcome, he will likely never visit by himself, instead relying on an assistant to accompany future visits. He concluded that this building had made him feel expected, and other participants agreed that it had many positive attributes. *Occupying*, however, was a different matter. While the building's powered entrance door, hearing loop, lifts, and long sightlines might expect disabled *visitors*, it did not necessarily expect *students* or *staff* who are Deaf, blind, neurodivergent, or use a wheelchair—certainly not in any numbers or with any regularity. The imaginaries of the architectural inhabitant, to borrow Stryker's words, seem to have predominantly assigned these core roles to non-disabled individuals. As such, the building continues some of the exclusionary rhetoric of academia and as contributes to the preservation of non-disabled norms rather than to the creation of spaces of truly plural embodiment.

ORIENTATION AND CIRCULATION: THE COST OF GETTING LOST

"I need spoons left, enough to get me home safely when I leave the space."³⁸

To the side of the prominent, visually distinctive staircase, two lifts offer an alternative way of vertical travel through the building. While the staircase is positioned in the new part of the building (the light and airy extension), the lifts are remnants of the pre-renovation edifice (a typical 1970s building with a double-loaded central corridor). As such, the lifts are small and not always able to meet demand; on the upper floors, they open into cramped internal lobbies usually filled with people waiting to get in. "The lifts are often over-used and it can take a long time to get space in a lift when they are used for transporting models etc," a wheelchair user reported his experience.³⁹ Negative reviews from others compound this observation: one of the Deaf contributors felt anxious about being alone in the small lift, whose windowless doors allow no visual connection to the space outside.⁴⁰ A neurodiverse participant noted that the bright lights and reflective metal surfaces of the lift were overstimulating,

³⁷ David Johnson.

³⁸ Natasha Trotman.

³⁹ Jordan Whitewood-Neal.

⁴⁰ Chris Laing.

making her consider the two escape stair cores, also remnants from the 1970s structure, as a quieter or more direct alternative to travel between floors.⁴¹ As such, experiencing the building 'by lift' is a stark contrast to experiencing is 'by staircase.' "The staircase goes right through the core of the building. It is lit and has a mix of materials that feel really amazing. It is designed to be a pivotal central core for the experience of the building," the other wheelchair user summed up. "This is not something I can experience. Not the same architectural thought that has been put into the lifts."⁴² (See Figure 5)

Stepping back out and into a lobby space lit brightly by lamps overhead, one contributor noted their "lift-induced disorientation."⁴³ In this lobby, several sets of glazed double doors present themselves, as well as some wayfinding information. The latter consists of black lettering on a white wall and, as such, has a good amount of contrast. It was also reviewed as being at an appropriate height for wheelchair users. However, there was a lack of structured signage using symbols to assist with environmental navigation. "Signage proved problematic," a neurodivergent participant reflected on the absence of pictograms. "Clear, universally recognisable signage combined with tactile markers could reduce confusion, support more independent navigation, and help someone like myself not expend too much energy or draw on too many internal resources to regulate, decipher, and cope in the space."⁴⁴ The absence of clear signifiers, she concluded, directly put her safety at risk.

In terms of layout, all upper storeys of the Bartlett School of Architecture are near-identical, something which received repeated positive mention: "Having each floor follow a similar pattern is really, really helpful because you can work out where you are [...] the layout is manageable."⁴⁵ To the back of the lifts, a straight corridor extends across the entire length of the building. This long, east-west axis, along which the studios are arranged, made orientation straightforward. "If one stands at the far back wall of the building in the main studio spaces [...] you can see a clear line all the way through the hallway to the other side of the building!," one neurodivergent contributor rejoiced. "It almost lends itself to

⁴¹ Natasha Trotman.

⁴² Jess Thom.

⁴³ Natasha Trotman.

⁴⁴ Natasha Trotman.

⁴⁵ Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

directing you unconsciously through a desired route.”⁴⁶ The long view and the flow of space through the building were appreciated, but so was the long wall to one side. The blind participants explained that being able to rely on tapping a cane against the wall on one side (say, right) while knowing the other side (say, left) opens into the studio spaces was akin to having a compass or a guiding star. “I feel quite comfortable in this space here [...] The solid wall on one side and the broken on the other. You could pretty quickly work out which way round you were if you forgot,” one summed up. “The solid wall is like the sun. A sighted person in the wilderness, they just look at the sun and orientate themselves by the sun.”⁴⁷

Still, orientation and navigation often proved challenging. On the fifth floor, the wall-mounted wayfinding signage was partly blocked by a piece of furniture—not a good start for one participant using a wheelchair and recording her attempts to find seminar room 5.02. Being unable to rely on the (visually blocked) overall signage, she looked for individual room numbers and found those to be printed in small font and positioned next to all doors at average standing eye-level. “There are no directions to particular rooms [...]. It takes a lot of energy to look for these rooms,” she noted. “We have now found 5.02, but it doesn’t say it anywhere except on a tiny bit of text very high up that my support worker was able to spot. I don’t think I would have found the room on my own.”⁴⁸ Other contributors also searched for ‘hidden’ offices and seminar spaces, finally encountering these rooms behind items of furniture or on the other side of heavy fire doors.⁴⁹

It was not simply *visual* wayfinding cues which fell short: there were also gaps in spatial or different sensory information. Firstly, blind individuals would benefit from a small model of the building—“just a model that you could touch [...] a sort of wooden scale model [...] once we touch, we understand the logic of a building—you can feel it when you feel the shape [...] you could take the roof off and you could explore the floor layouts that way.”⁵⁰ This might be made available upon entering the Bartlett School of Architecture. Furthermore, neurodivergent individuals noted they process sensory input differently, relying on diverse sensory

⁴⁶ Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa.

⁴⁷ Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

⁴⁸ Jess Thom.

⁴⁹ Chris Laing and Coco Briden. Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa.

⁵⁰ David Johnson.

information for navigating their environment. These sensory experiences are not just preferences but critical, deeply wired, and often essential ways for them to navigate daily life. “Material choices and the effects of light reflection [...] profoundly affect sensory comfort and spatial orientation,” one participant stated.⁵¹ An over-reliance on visual clues for orientation is problematic. Many neurodivergent individuals experience cognitive overload, which can be exhausting. Moving through the building, the participant repeatedly experienced “visual overload, with bright lights and reflective surfaces” and needed “too much *energy* [...] to regulate, decipher, and cope in this [dysregulating] space.”⁵²

Matters of wayfinding often came back to such questions of energy. This might be the mental energy noted by the neurodivergent participant, or it might be physical energy. Navigating the building involves negotiating many sets of fire doors, and these are heavy and lack automatic openers—a topic which arose repeatedly. “The absence of automatic openers feels like a block to my movement” one participant noted.⁵³ “An aspect that drew on my energy in the space were heavy doors,” another recorded.⁵⁴ Indeed, when he was “carrying bags and coffee, they [the doors] were unusable,” a third contributor noted.⁵⁵ The accumulative effect of having to open these doors to access any area of the building was significant. “One of the things which is really exhausting about being in this building is the relentlessness of trying to get through spaces [...],” one wheelchair user summed up. “Without a support worker, I just wouldn’t be able to move around this space at all [...] I am getting worn out by moving through a building with lots of heavy doors.”⁵⁶ (See Figure 6)

Crucially, the Bartlett School of Architecture has no dedicated space for regaining this lost energy. “The absence of formal quiet or resting spaces is a considerable gap. I found a few informal spaces that were ‘disrupted’ after a few minutes,” one of the neurodivergent participants summarised. “Designated calming spaces would be essential to hold space for those being underserved in the building and foster inclusivity and wellbeing.”⁵⁷ On a final note, she references Christine Miserandino, who

⁵¹ Natasha Trotman.

⁵² Natasha Trotman.

⁵³ Jess Thom.

⁵⁴ Natasha Trotman.

⁵⁵ Jordan Whitewood-Neal.

⁵⁶ Jess Thom.

⁵⁷ Natasha Trotman.

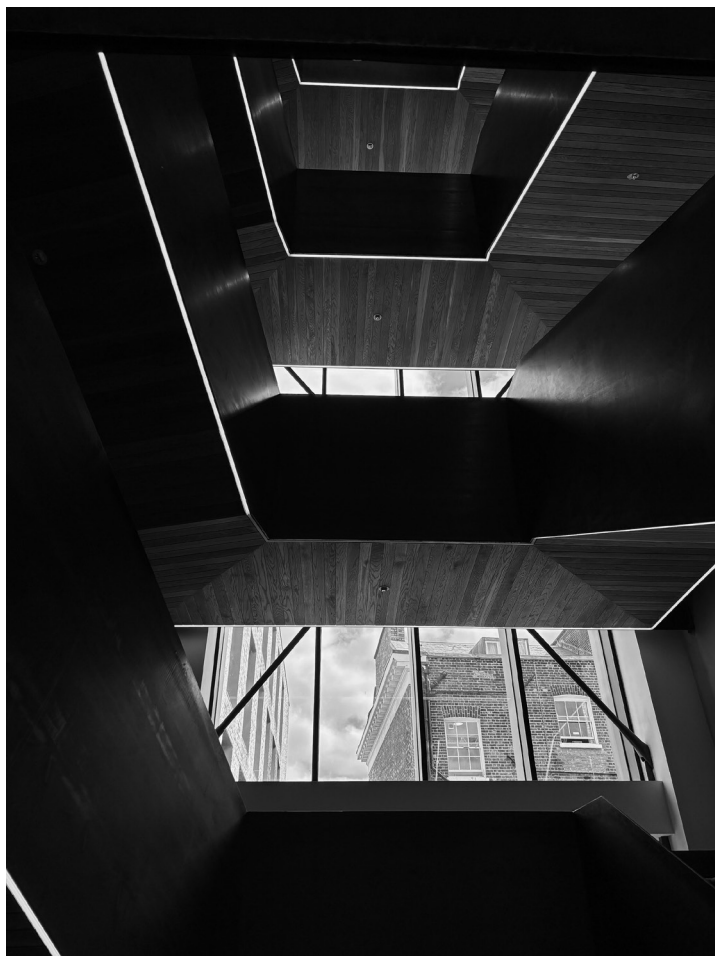


Figure 6. “A pivotal central core for the experience of the building,” the main staircase. Photograph by Jess Thom.



Figure 7. Large, heavy fire doors without automatic openers require much energy to open. Photograph by Jess Thom.

explains her experience with chronic illness through the *spoon theory*: Miserandino describes that, while most people start their day with what feels like unlimited possibilities, those living with chronic illness must carefully plan and ration their activities to conserve energy. She uses a limited number of spoons as a metaphor for the limited physical or mental energy she has available to complete daily tasks. Each spoon represents a specific amount of energy; running out of spoons means having no energy left to give and being unable to complete even simple tasks. The absence of a designated quiet space made it difficult to rest, calm down, and recoup the expended energy. Exhausted after moving through the building, the neurodivergent participant therefore ponders the cost of getting lost, concluding that she cannot explore the space any further: “I need spoons left, enough to get home safely when I leave the space.”⁵⁸

Returning, again, to empathy as an architectural lens, the participants’ experiences question the provision of equitable access to movement through the building.

Sociologist Mimi Sheller argues that movement through space deeply shapes society, power, and inequality. She problematises “uneven mobilities”—the unequal distribution of the ability to move—and argues “that the concept of mobility justice can highlight the structurally distributed class, racial, gendered, and other inequalities in the potential for mobility.”⁵⁹ The monumental, highly visible staircase acts as an obvious barrier to mobility except for the most able-bodied individuals: “Staircase use demands legs that perform the functions of pressing and lifting, non-asthmatic lungs, hearts that withstand elevated blood pressure, and necessary energy,” disabled activist and design researcher Aimi Hamraie lists, adding that individuals with “chronic fatigue, heart and lung conditions, and/or prosthetic limbs [also] [...] do not easily climb stairs.”⁶⁰ Physical access to all spaces is granted via the lifts, but a clear visual understanding of the building, the participation in social interaction intended to take place on the staircase, and the enjoyment of the what is arguably the Bartlett School of Architecture’s most appealing component are not possible. Less obvious architectural features also limited free movement. Heavy doors, bright lights and high contrast, and poor signage made

⁵⁸ Natasha Trotman.

⁵⁹ M. Sheller, “Mobility Justice,” in M. Büscher *et al.* (eds.), *Handbook of Research Methods and Applications for Mobilities*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2020, p. 12.

⁶⁰ A. Hamraie, “(Ir)Resistible Stairs: Public Health, Desiring Practices, and Material-Symbolic Ableism,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 76, 1, 2022, p. 50.

continuous demands on participants’ energy levels to the point that some were left exhausted and with only just enough spoons to make it home. As such, the building still significantly shapes who gets to move, where, and how, thus both reflecting and reproducing inequalities.

INDEPENDENCE AND INTERDEPENDENCE: TAKING UP SPACE

“Architects build to the minimum; they don’t factor in the generosity of life.”⁶¹

The building has a mix of specialised, collaborative, and general-purpose spaces designed to support education: from design studios, model-making workshops, seminar spaces, lecture halls, and computer labs to staff offices, a student lounge, and a café space. Some of these are housed in enclosed, dedicated rooms, but the majority of the building is open-plan, and spaces are designed to be used flexibly. The large, L-shaped entrance foyer regularly turns into a major exhibition and event area throughout the academic year. The spacious landings adjacent to the staircase function as a space for pin-ups, for seminar teaching, and for group work—often simultaneously. The staircase itself—in its central location, with a width which accommodates several people standing or walking side by side, with its lavish materials and natural daylight—doubles as the most important social space in the Bartlett School of Architecture: it is almost impossible to move between floors without bumping into someone and stopping for a chat (indeed, staff in a hurry are known to use the emergency escape stairs at the ends of the building to avoid these enjoyable but time-consuming encounters).

The open plan of individual spaces was often experienced positively. Most attention was given to the large landing areas, which function partly as circulation space (using the staircase on one side and accessing formal rooms on the other both involves crossing the landings) and partly as teaching space (the landings are typically populated with tables for tutorials and seminars and sometimes divided by temporary structures for pinning up work). The Deaf participants benefited from the clear sight lines that the open-plan landings offered, although some of the temporary timber partitions did block these views: “It would be difficult to know if there’s a meeting behind the wall, because I can’t see

⁶¹ Jess Thom.

through it. So, I might accidentally interrupt that meeting. I wouldn't be aware of the meeting because it's difficult to see through. It's important to consider factors like that."⁶² Others also reflected on the intricacies of a space which is at the same time physically open and visually restricted. One contributor generally appreciated room for manoeuvring her wheelchair but, living with Tourette's Syndrome, she was conscious of the sound the power chair's motor makes as well as of her own involuntary vocal sounds. These may be perceived by an invisible audience—people she cannot see behind corners and partitions but who will hear her: "As someone who makes noise, I will be audible to people in the space. The space makes me aware of that."⁶³

The space is not just open-plan. Its deliberately informal planning also features overlapping functions and programmes. As such, it assumes a user as someone who is energetic, mobile, and can read normative visual and spatial cues easily.⁶⁴ For the blind contributors in particular, the coming together of several intended functions around the stair and landings presented a complex issue. In these areas, teaching space and "social space [become] mixed up with transitional space [...] rather than there being a transition from one place to another." This makes occupying the building difficult. One participant explained that for blind individuals, any orientation was predicated on "understanding the logic of the building." Pointing at his co-contributor, he explained: "She is so good at envisaging the pattern in the building by walking through it and remembering the turns." This understanding of spatial patterns allows for the creation of a complex mental map. Navigating the distance between any two points within the building involves invoking a clear directional 'straight line' on this mental map—the path along which he travels. "I put my two feet on that line [...] so I'd be going straight forward," he notes, explaining how he uses the wall of a corridor against which a cane can be tapped or the predictable trajectory of a staircase which allows for maintaining orientation. "It's good because [...] you won't lose direction."⁶⁵

Importantly, however, this invisible straight line relies on continuity of movement. "The straight line helps us get from A to B and that's

⁶² Chris Laing.

⁶³ Jess Thom.

⁶⁴ This is a common 'model' of preferred performance in higher education. Such traits are seen as indicators of competence, rather than discriminatory against other forms of intelligence and creativity.

⁶⁵ David Johnson.

logical for us. But coming off that straight line, into social settings—we can do that but getting back to the straight line is a big challenge for us.” In other words, if he stops to talk on the landing, as encouraged by the building, he loses his place on the line and needs to re-orientate himself—something which is not easy, especially as there are no tactile indicators signalling the transition from landing to stairs. The worry is that he might accidentally move from the landing onto the staircase and fall. “The sequential part of a journey. I acknowledge you need that for survival,” he concludes. “So that’s why if you are going to mix up transitional areas and social space, it’s important to remember what it’s like from our point of view.”⁶⁶ While its configurational logic is clear and appreciated by blind participants, the absence of basic tactility marking at the top or the bottom of the staircase also makes the stairs potentially hazardous.

Further complicating this process of maintaining orientation on a mental map is the soundscape resulting from an open, multipurpose space. Blind individuals partly perceive a room’s size, spatial layout, and features by sound. This process includes listening to sound—for example the tap of a cane—reflected from walls, ceilings, floors, and furniture for an acoustic outline of the space. It also involves listening to sounds and voices coming from windows, doors, and activities in the room. As such, ideally, on the landing spaces, you “could orientate your directional self [...] know you’d have the social space behind you and you know to walk forward for the stairs.” Unsurprisingly, however, sound orientation proved extremely difficult in the building because of its disruptive background noise spilling from one space into others. “You’re not actually hearing what’s important to hear [...]. Orientating yourself in this space, I think, would be hard. Very hard. I’ve already lost the sense of where the staircase is,” one participant summed up. The other agrees: “it’s confusing me and making me feel anxious—it’s disorientating.”⁶⁷

As the intentionally flexible spaces accommodate ever-changing activities, supporting items—furniture, temporary partitions, exhibition props, teaching material—incessantly move across the building. This includes furniture. One participant noted that when she first entered the Bartlett School of Architecture, a table and chairs had been positioned near the entrance. Upon returning a while later, the chairs had disappeared. (See Figure 6) The situation of returning to a supposed space of

⁶⁶ David Johnson.

⁶⁷ Mandy Redvers-Rowe and David Johnson.

rest, to find it gone, and to struggle finding a different space to rest resulted in her feeling like she was “swimming from one island to another [...] like being under water and [it is] hard to breathe.”⁶⁸

In other parts of the building, the opposite situation caused similar distress: things appeared rather than disappeared. The Bartlett School of Architecture is a space of intense productivity, with students constantly generating work as they progress through their education. Around the studios, various items—cardboard boxes, items of equipment, large bins, printers—are prone to gradually appearing and taking up the floor area. “Architects build to the minimum, they don’t factor in the generosity of life; the generosity of stuff,” one wheelchair user commented. Corridors comply with minimal legal requirements and, as such, are theoretically suitable for a wheelchair. However, our contributor found herself unable to use them, “not because of the physical constraints of the space but because of the way items have been situated in there.” There were, she notes, “at least 9 or 10 obstacles which would stop me moving down this straight path.”⁶⁹

Space is shaped and re-shaped everyday through inhabitation, and the processes of student work steadily cluttered the corridors, meaning they are no longer easily navigable for a wheelchair user. These changing conditions cannot be captured—or maybe even predicted—in static architectural plans but they fundamentally influence disabled people’s access. In fact, the building’s assumed patterns of inhabitation undermined architects’ positive design decisions. Some of the heavy double doors mentioned in the previous section, for example, are intended to be kept open on door-holding-magnets but are kept closed to reduce noise. Similarly, the doors to individual staff offices have a design detail allowing them to be locked in an open position to create a welcoming environment, but they are now almost always closed. Given these office doors have no glass panels, this decision again negatively impacts how the participant using wheelchair uses the space: “Some doors did not have windows, and this will affect how confident I feel about going into a room.”⁷⁰ Similarly, for Deaf people, not being able to see if a staff member is in their office, limits their potential interactions.

⁶⁸ Natasha Trotman.

⁶⁹ Jess Thom.

⁷⁰ Jess Thom.

Returning to the wheelchair user in the studio, with its floor populated by the remnants of busy making processes: this space has now become an inaccessible “obstacle course.” In this instance, the hurdles are located in front of an area she has been keen to explore: the windows. “There are these windows that have views out onto the city [...]. There is something important to me in feeling that the building is connected to the city beyond it, and to the weather, to what is happening outside, and to the light. But these are views which are not easy for me to access because of the amount of stuff that is in the spaces.”⁷¹ Not being able to move through the space freely and with dignity is frustrating: “It creates fuss—me knocking into things and people having to move stuff out of the way for me. That makes me not want to bother.”⁷² (See Figure 7) The question arises, *Who has the right to take up space in these areas?*

Finally, then, using empathy as an architectural lens frames how the day-to-day use of the building—the intended productive, busy, fast-paced schedule of education—entrenches spatial disparity.

Disability studies scholar Tanya Titchkosky affirms that “when disability is taken as something that basically does not belong, it allows for the management of disability as an exception,” eventually leading to disabled bodies becoming “essentially excludable.”⁷³ Space is socially produced; it is created through everyday routines and material flows.⁷⁴ In this building, these activities include the simultaneous hosting of parallel events in open-plan areas, the closing of barrier-like doors to section off parts of the building, the unpredictable re-arranging of furniture and other items to accommodate relentless processes of scholarly production, the prioritisation of independence over interdependence. Students and staff, most of whom do not identify as disabled, take control of and gradually shape the space according to their (supposedly standardisable and common-sense) needs and goals, meaning the building becomes moulded to accommodate their activities and their bodies. These spatial interventions make normative bodies “belong,” in Titchkosky’s words, while disabled bodies become “an exception” and “essentially excludable”: they do not partake in these processes of spatial production, and their needs are not reflected in this architectural authorship.

⁷¹ Jess Thom.

⁷² Jess Thom.

⁷³ Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, pp. 34; 39.

⁷⁴ M. de Certeau, S. Rendall, *The Practice of Everyday*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1984; H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1991.



Figure 8. A table whose accompanying chairs disappeared during the visit. Photo by Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa.

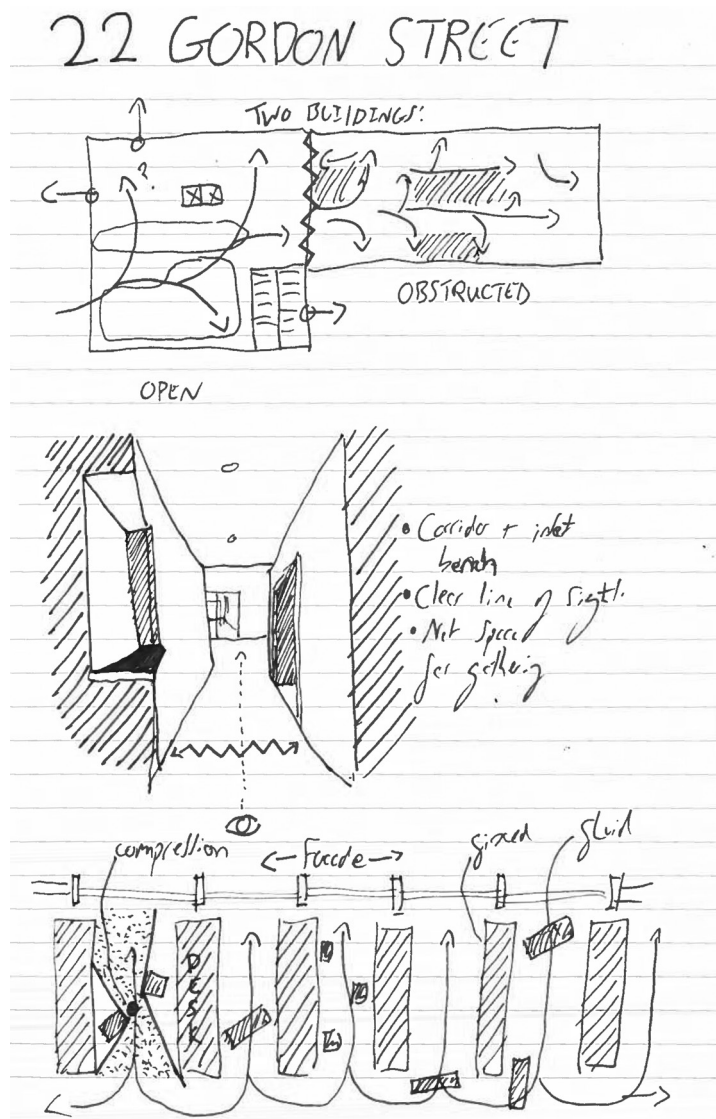


Figure 9. "Tight spaces I can't fit in and items at heights I can't reach." Drawing by Jordan Whitewood-Neal.

CONCLUSION

“Spaces speak and have their own language; this space is an eclectic polyglot.”⁷⁵

The aim of this study was to consider how using empathy as a method for considering architecture might highlight the many mechanisms of spatial and social exclusion which the common focus on access and legal compliance continues to disregard, devalue, and ultimately erase. Empathy was understood not as *feeling-for* but as *solidarity-with* disability—in other words: as paying attention to a variety of modes of being, relating, and knowing in space.

Of course, as Garland-Thompson states, “[t]o embrace the supposedly flawed body of disability is to critique [...] fantasies of wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness. The disabled body is contradiction, ambiguity, and partiality incarnate.”⁷⁶ As such, many insights were complex and dissonant: items placed on the floor were useful markers for blind participants but obstacles for wheelchair users; partitions stopping short of meeting the ceiling gave Deaf participants a helpful connection to the next space but caused a contributor with Tourette’s Syndrome to worry about being heard; neurodivergent participants found the many reflective materials overwhelming while Deaf contributors suggested installing more mirrored surfaces to create helpful sightlines; the blind participants worried about getting lost in the larger open-plan spaces while these were most easy to negotiate for wheelchair users. Part of developing a better understanding of diverse disabled experiences of built space is to recognise that whilst there will sometimes be alignments, there will also be tensions and contradictions (indeed, within disability ‘categories’ as much as between them.)

Still, participants’ experiences frequently complemented each other. There were many positive comments for this building which was, in many ways, reviewed as welcoming, accessible, and enjoyable. On the other hands, the contributors highlighted the many ways in which spaces, architectural details, and assumed patterns of inhabitation did not recognise multiple ways of being in the world but rather enforced non-disabled and neurotypical standards.

For one, the building made clear assumptions about who is expected—without difficulty or special accommodation—inside its walls,

⁷⁵ Natasha Trotman.

⁷⁶ R. Garland-Thomson, “Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory,” *NWSA journal*, 14, 3, 2002, p. 28.

in which role and in what numbers they are expected, and who is ‘out of place’ in the environments of higher education. The informal, mixed use and multi-layered spaces may have many benefits, but they reproduce dominant ideals of academic performance by envisaging a user who is endlessly energetic, hyper mobile, visually oriented, and always ‘on,’ casting this normative *bodymind* as a requirement for university life.

Furthermore, participants noted that norms oriented bodies in space. The monumental staircase was presented as the ‘normal’ path or vertical circulation, with the lift of clear secondary architectural importance. Visual wayfinding was assumed suitable for all, with no consideration for auditory or sensory clues as potentially central for orientation. Questions around what types of movement, whose need for comfort, and what energy levels are legitimate also arose. Buildings designed empathetically would take these aspects more centrally into account.

Finally, day-to-day spatial authorship—the use of open plan spaces to run several events in parallel, the closing of doors intended to remain open, the appropriation of space to accommodate speedy production – normalises certain practices and bodies. As such, it casts rest, slowness, variability, and difference as ‘other’ and ‘essentially excludable’, preventing opportunities to create spaces where multiple body types and sensory needs are also seen as normal.⁷⁷

There is no one-size-fits-all model for architecture; bodies, minds, and experiences differ (and intersect!) in fundamental ways. Still, design empathy resides in *staying with the problem* and working with and through such dissonant experiences to arrive at a different model of sharing, living and learning together in the same university building.⁷⁸ Architects can work with flexible, negotiable, and just systems that respect bodily diversity, start from inclusive approaches (rather than designing for ‘normal’ *bodyminds* before adding access elements to include those who we have already been left out) and actively challenge normative assumptions. Estates teams can go beyond mere compliance, starting from the premise that disabled individuals are already present on campus and that their insights should be central from the outset of any building project. The power of design processes, in other words, must be re-distributed and the roles of architects and estate teams shifted from expert problem-solvers

⁷⁷ T. Titchkosky, *The Question of Access*, pp. 34–39.

⁷⁸ D. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2016.

to empathetic listeners, collaborators, and co-designers (as recently modelled by Maria Kramer) with the aim of building a world that assumes all bodies in it.⁷⁹ Aligning design processes more closely with the disability rights mantra “nothing about us without us” will serve everyone: as Natalia Pérez Liebergesell and Ann Heylighen’s article in this issue points out, all of us—disabled or non-disabled—benefit from good design features.⁸⁰

The built environment only becomes meaningful when it anticipates the fullness of human experience. Thinking across bodies, standpoints, and experiences—with *empathy and solidarity*—this study thus aligns with scholarship urging architecture to work toward disability, social and spatial justice and with architectural practitioners moving beyond compliance, challenging normative body assumptions, and expanding design imagination.

To change how architecture understands bodies, space, power, and design responsibility, much needs to be done, so it is fortunate that the door to this university building—heavy as it may be, missing a vision panel in a glass facade, and hidden in a recess—remains open for future conversation:

“So yeah. I would return here.”⁸¹

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⁷⁹ M. Kramer, “Fluid Freedom: An Empathetic Pool Design Empowering a Client with Multiple Sclerosis,” *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 28, 3, 2024, pp. 232–242.

⁸⁰ N. Pérez Liebergesell, A. Heylighen, “Resonance Across Critical Users: An Invitation to Approach Diversity in Architectural Design Qualitatively,” *Khôrein*, 4, 2, 2026, pp. 11–42.

⁸¹ Mandy Redvers-Rowe.

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