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WANDA KATJA LIEBERMANN, *ARCHITECTURE'S
DISABILITY PROBLEM*, ROUTLEDGE, NEW YORK, 2024.

There is a growing, albeit still limited, number of architectural texts that approach architecture directly through the lens of disability theory and history. Several years ago, we had David Gissen's *The Architecture of Disability*, and now Wanda Katja Liebermann has written a rich and comprehensive study of disability's place within the tensioned conditions of architectural pedagogy, practice, and the wider state and federal policies that inform them. It is a study that provides readers with a historical and embodied collection of insights into, specifically, the US context of jurisdiction, professional practice, and education.

Liebermann makes it clear from the beginning that her intention is to show how, "[t]he body is the link between cultural capital and ableism in architecture because it both incorporates values and generates them"¹ and where the possible scales of architectural production through and with disability enable ways of subverting ableist notions of disabled bodies. The book's focus on multiple forms of practice is intended to underpin how this practice materialises wider social and cultural perspectives, where, "by scrutinizing building design, one can discover the explicit as well as tacit beliefs that architects and clients hold about disability, a reflection of wider social values".² She argues that by, "theorizing connections between othered disabilities, incarceration, and liminal civic status helped me make sense of my findings outside dominant (liberal) epistemic fields and their contradictions"³

¹ K. W. Liebermann, *Architecture's Disability Problem*, p. 60.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

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Liebermann begins by establishing the trajectory of theory regarding disability in parallel and intersection with various other fields; cybernetics, linguistics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, sociology and geography. This highlights the historical lack of attention given to disability within the field of architecture, which has itself engaged with and utilised many of these epistemologies. Liebermann directly adopts the framework of ableism from Critical Disability Studies to show how the possible scales of architectural production through and with disability reflect the ableism inherent in capitalist regimes of spatial practice. One of the most admirable parts of this book is its extensive use of multiple methods of research which directly critique traditional objectified engagement with disabled experiences. Instead, opting to gather and reflect back on Liebermann's own embodied experience across policy, pedagogy and practice, and the wide-reaching set of actors she encountered during this work. From archival, observational, biographical, and ethnographic research, to formal analysis, interviews, and media, the book surveys and makes use of these multiple narratives within the field.

One of the most important arguments Liebermann begins with is how the ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) transformed access into a juridical project, where not only were disabled people in the eyes of the judiciary often placed in a state of exceptionality, but simultaneously it constructed the ideal disabled subject. The chapter on policy narrates the convoluted, contradictory and inequitable bureaucratic systems through which disabled people are often forced to navigate. Liebermann references the work of law scholar Mita Chatterjee, who argues that the "lack of jurisdictional uniformity trivializes the importance of accessibility for people with disabilities, as well as underestimates the magnitude of the civil rights principles supporting the ADA."⁴ The consequences of these judicial approaches, it is argued, meant there is limited attention to exploring design via the culture and nuance of disability and the history of Disability Justice. Instead, practitioners end up wrapped up in legal frameworks which reduce disability to policy negotiation, forming a constitutional divide.⁵ Although the section on policy shows a rigorous attention to the troubled processes and implications of the ADA, there is arguably a lack of attention to the way such policies have intersected

⁴ Access Denied and Not Designed: The Ninth Circuit Drafts a Narrow Escape for Architect Liability under the *Americans with Disabilities Act* in *Lonberg v. Sanborn Theaters, Inc.*, 9 Jeffrey S. Moorad Sports L.J. 293 (2002).

⁵ K. W. Liebermann, *Architecture's Disability Problem*, p. 26.

and existed in tension with other movements of civil rights—from race, gender, to trans rights.

The chapter on pedagogy addresses the many ableist conditions created by architectural education, from studio cultures harmful to students, to student/tutor dynamics which reinforce certain forms of design, language, and style which neglect any idea of disabled embodiment. The chapter is structured as follows: Space, Body, Time, and Words and Images—moving across spatial scales and temporalities of the architecture school, reflecting on the tensions between pedagogical labour and, for example, disability principles such as crip time. Liebermann addresses these tensions by framing the ableist habitus of architectural education, where “habitus describes the recursive mechanism for transmitting meaning between cultural values, social structures, and individuals.”⁶ This reminded me of Stuart Hall’s concept of encoding/decoding where media produces (encodes) with intended meanings based on dominant ideologies, but are interpreted (decoded) by audiences in varied ways based on their own social context. Liebermann’s focus on ableism as a process which is facilitated through proliferated cultures in the architecture school is an important contribution. Later on she references how this ableism manifests in civilising and eugenic terms:

The sociologist Bill Hughes connects ableism to what Norbert Elias calls the civilizing process. Elias’s thesis was that as Western societies moved into the modern age, formerly acceptable bodily properties and habits had to be hidden from sight. This shroud of “intimiza-tion” left only so-called healthy, clean, invulnerable bodies acceptable for public viewing. Hughes notes that eliminating disability was essential to this movement because the vulnerable and exposed bodies of disabled people disrupted the bodily control now demanded by society.⁷

However, what I hoped from this chapter was the exploration of pedagogy at the scale of the brief, how disability often finds troubled ground in the conventional design brief and looking towards examples of pedagogy that challenge disability beyond ADA—through contexts of debility and disablement both in the US and beyond. By focusing on

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

ableism and pedagogy primarily through student and faculty experiences of disability within the functionalities of the academy (following other critical works by Jay Dolmage, Tanya Titchkosky, and Margaret Price) the book addresses only one dimension of pedagogy.

The most forward-looking moments of the book often occur briefly at the end of the chapters, specifically how the COVID-19 pandemic, in Liebermann's words, created "a call for elevating the importance of embodied knowledge—of *lived* bodies—for new emancipatory material practices and cultural formations."⁸ But these critical reflections and insights feel sometimes left too late.

Although Liebermann surveyed 3 case studies for the chapter on practice (first the Ed Robert's Campus and then Gallaudet University) I have chosen to focus on the lesser-known study of St. Coletta School of Greater Washington. This chapter is the book's most valuable contribution to the intersected fields of architecture and Critical Disability Studies. It brings together several complex components: Liebermann's own familial experience of learning disabilities through the story of her brother, learning disabilities history in the United States and the troubled and often critiqued sites of both institutions and special education schools, and finally the question of citizenship and civic space through the St. Coletta case study which raises questions around segregation, civility, and control and surveillance.

The chapter importantly details the history of intellectual disability—and "how architecture, democracy, the US education system, and intellectual disabilities are construed by designers and others who shape the lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities."⁹ In her strongest critique of St. Coletta school, Liebermann critiques the institution's approach to education and the hidden or implicit modes of control and civilising practices. She says: "Eugenics' centrality to capitalist systems thus maintains the sorting and elimination of superfluous bodies (labor). St. Coletta contributes to this wholesale separation of people with intellectual disabilities from society."¹⁰

One of the key focuses is the redesign of the school building, a process entangled with postmodernist approaches and style, and educational practices favored by the school's head. The question of student

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 168.

agency sits at the heart of Liebermann's critique, arguing how the students' voices were mostly absent from the design processes and inherently perceived as incapable of engaging. "From pre-design discussions to contemporary rhetoric about St. Coletta, students have been imagined as the heart of the endeavor even as they were left out of the process."¹¹

Two intersecting spatial and social motifs of the school are its domestic typology, which Liebermann links to historical examples of colony plan institutions, and the domestic practices that made up part of the schools pedagogy—where the key goal was becoming better family members and citizens. Liebermann argues how these conditions are responsible for imposing a spatial and civic normativity.

Segregated education perpetuates more segregation. In other words, out of desperation, resignation, and socialization, parents and teaching professionals come to accept, even extol, segregated learning. By doing so, they reinforce existing practices and the belief systems on which they are premised. This in turn supports the dehumanizing geography of differential human worth based on socially constructed and dubious measures and ranks.¹²

What Liebermann uses this study to demonstrate is that a non-segregational approach to education has the potential to offer alternative ways of theorizing and designing architecture and its pedagogies. But she also acknowledges the feedback received by students (who critically, do have voices)—in which they state positive feelings towards the school. The narrative and tensions explored in this chapter expose the ongoing tensions and opposing frameworks of the schools leadership and architects with disabled practitioners and scholars.

The book's methodology, highlighted densely in the exploration of St. Coletta, of engaging with the multiple stakeholders that are (directly or indirectly) involved in disability and architecture collectively—also raises the question of empathy. Empathy is explored most directly by Liebermann towards the end of the chapter on Gallaudet:

While empathy is an essential capacity for humans and architects, it is also problematic in the architectural (and other professional) context. Empathic projection is often undertaken by persons who

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 187.

do not share the lived experience or identity of the design recipients. Thus, it places the architect in the role of ventriloquizing the needs of other (Deaf, disabled, POC, queer, etc.) people. [...] Especially when power differentials exist between empathizer and object of empathy, empathy involves a displacement of the user's position by the architect usurpation that can produce partial and even false knowledge. This seems particularly acute given how little attention is paid to embodiment, experience, and subjectivity in architectural education.¹³

Empathy, Liebermann shows, is a challenging and contested emotion and ideology. It continues to inform relationalities between disabled and non-disabled people, and can even sometimes be exploited as a tool of ableism to disenfranchise disabled agency. In the conclusion of the book, Liebermann turns to the idea of deconstructing and (un)mapping (or arguably re-mapping) the fields of disability and design by attending to "architecture's disability future"—asking: "How can we reconcile capitalist pressure with what queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz calls the "crazy, risky, wild leaps into the world" needed to access disability futures?"¹⁴

This book would provide any student, practitioner, and researcher interested in the entangled histories of disability and architecture in the United States with an in-depth introduction to some of the key questions and critiques around access, educational practice, and most importantly, the tensions embodied between empathy, citizenship and agency. The book arguably has limitations in how disability (and disablement) is considered—and some of the earlier intentions of the book regarding disability's links to justice, incarceration and other civil rights, are not fully explored. Education and practices roles in the proliferation of violent architectures or urban segregation are absent, and pedagogy is reduced to more pragmatic experiences of the academic environment. But regardless of these critiques, the book is a welcome contribution to the field, and a key text for introducing those outside or tangential to our complex discipline, to its vital histories and ideas.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209. And see: J. E. Muñoz, (2019), *Cruising Utopia: The then and There of Queer Futurity*, 10th anniversary ed., New York University Press, New York, 2019, p. 147.