TOWARDS SLOW LEARNING SPACE; A MANIFESTO FOR DESIGN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT
This paper outlines a series of projects bringing together disabled artists, architects and design students. Through collaborative work and debate, we have begun to develop new approaches and principles which aim to 're-locate' disability and design beyond simplistic notions of accessibility. The paper discusses an alternative concept - Slow Space – offered as having the potential to bridge across separate areas of socially responsive expertise such as inclusive design, sustainability and pedagogy, so as to make a bigger impact on mainstream activities in design education. It is argued that, to create a better world, we need to develop design approaches which are not just about 'helping the disabled', but which start from disability and difference in order to critique 'normal' design.

Keywords: Disability, architecture, inclusive design, disability arts, learning spaces, social inclusion

1   INTRODUCTION

Towards Slow Learning Spaces: a manifesto for design education grew out of a series of projects which have been bringing together disabled and Deaf artists, architects and interior design students in the UK in a variety of creative relationships over the last five years. These started from our belief that design for disability has become 'stuck' under the rubrics of accessibility and inclusive design; and that these terms (once radical) are now limiting, rather than supporting creative debate and action. We have become increasingly interested in developing new approaches, centred on changing personal and professional *attitudes*, which bridge across what are currently areas of separate expertise - inclusive design, sustainability and pedagogy. This paper begins with a summary of the problem with concepts of accessibility and inclusive design in relationship to architectural design; followed by a discussion of three projects (*Making Discursive Spaces*, *Architecture-InsideOut* and *So What is Normal?)* so as to describe, and reflect on, some of the collaborative processes through which alternative approaches are being developed. It then outlines these approaches, including the development of a set of principles and practices which we have called Slow Space; and finally considers some of the methods through which we are attempting to influence contemporary design education and practice, towards making a better world for everyone.

2   THE PROBLEM WITH ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVE DESIGN

Contemporary architectural and educational practices have certainly reflected the wider cultural shift from medical to social models of disability, that is away from a 'special needs' approach to a focus on the barriers (both physical and attitudinal) which prevent disabled people from engaging in everyday life. But rather than this leading to the better integration of disability and diversity into design education and practice, it has, I suggest, merely ended up reinforcing assumptions about disabled people as a special case, whose needs can be responded to separately from, and in the aftermath of, mainstream design processes. In architecture disabled people are still mainly dealt with at the practical/technical end of design considerations; through the 'add-on' of design guidance and technical solutions. Here, disability is a 'problem' that can be solved via specific professional expertise *on behalf of* the disabled user. In the process, disability is framed as something which can be 'overcome' and disabled people enabled to be more like 'normal' people through the addition of designed devices (ramps, platform lifts, grips). Thus, whilst the emphasis of the social model on removing physical barriers appears to offer architects and designers the opportunity to develop socially relevant design improvements, this is predominantly articulated as designing these barriers 'out' through extra additions to normal design – rather than by seeing 'normal' design itself as the problem. Here,

individual disabled people can come to stand for/conform to a fixed definition of medical impairment, their particular desires, preferences and personalities left without a 'space'. The rich experiences, responses and strategies of diverse disabled people to their material surroundings are thus flattened out into the single dimension of 'user' access. Locating disabled people predominantly within the separate category of accessibility also leaves them over-exposed as a difficulty for designers -somehow 'different' - people whose needs can only be met through a series of awkward to achieve, yet basically technical (thus banal and dull) solutions. This has prevented easy integration of disability and related issues into design teaching and learning, precisely because such solutions are also perceived as being 'added' onto conceptual ideas or processes; as a drag to, or potential undermining of, the more important processes of creativity and invention.

Concepts such as inclusive and universal design have attempted to resolve some of these difficulties with accessibility by blurring the boundaries between different kinds of disadvantage; and by recognising that disability is not a minority issue, but will affect almost all of us during our lifetimes. Here, the emphasis is less on the particular 'needs' of the disabled and more on how design improvements can be on benefit for everyone. Again, though, inclusive design has become predominantly about listing mobility, visual and other differences from the 'norm' and then designing functional responses, such as way-finding systems, which are still 'add-ons' but are now articulated as for everyone. Whilst many of these practical improvements *have* made a difference to people's lives, the research and projects outlined here deliberately begin from a different place. Rather than perceiving disability either as a problem to be fixed or just something we all share, we see it instead as a substantial challenge to our underlying assumptions about who and what is 'normal' – and a starting point for inculcating new, innovative and creative attitudes about what design *is*. Rather than developing design subject expertise specifically around disability (which is then disseminated to 'non-experts' via design guidance and the like) we have began to explore what underlying principles and practices can offer a different way of 'being' not just in relation to disability, but around our ethical and social relationships and practices more generally. Increasingly this has become about how disability can 'talk back' to a world which highly values (and at the same time makes invisible) mobility, speed, independence and personal autonomy [1].

2.1 Re-valuing (dis)abilities

Most immediately, then, design theories and practices need to begin to undo this hegemony of the normal/abnormal binary and *to institute alternative ways of thinking about the abnormal body* [2]. We need to understand more about how particular framings of disabilities are perpetuated and to listen much more attentively to how disabled people themselves articulate their lives. This is not by generalising from various medical conditions or 'needs' but by learning about the many different and creative strategies disabled people develop to deal with the inadequacies of the material world. Most importantly, this needs to be developed within a broader conceptual framework. Capturing and responding to a variety of experiences is not just a matter of relativism: of merely accumulating different perspectives, opinions or actions. Our bodies first and foremost are the point of view that each of us lives as subjects; but we also are bodies-for-others, as our corporeal realities interact. This recognises that different bodies have various characteristics, like height or weight, *as part of the normal diversity of the human community* [3]. But we can also be alienated bodies, positioned into taking someone-else's view on how our body is defined. The post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha [4] has shown how the patterning of stereotypical identities into binary divisions (such as able-bodied/disabled, white/black, male/female, old/young) where one term is marked in common-sense as superior to other, represents attempts to naturalise particular versions of how society works, in support of specific relationships of power and inequality. The location, conventionally, of the disabled body with the functional, objective, clinical and technical in design education is based on such a patterning and conspires to perpetuate its lowly status within the discipline. But Bhabha also shows how such attempts at imposing such an order on the world are always partial and ultimately unachievable. In addition, disabled people do not live the stereotypes of disability; they live their many different relationships to them. This suggests that we need to open up our 'commonsense' assumptions and methods about 'what is normal' in relation to disability and design through the development of innovative and creative discursive spaces between the many participants in the design and building process. These must start from properly 'taking notice of' and 'attending to' the diverse experiences

and narratives of disabled people. Damian Toal, one of the collaborators, explains why working with disabled and Deaf artists opens up new avenues for designers:

As disabled artists and users, we are forced to constantly evaluate form and function and engage creatively with practical problems around negotiating space. This emotional and physical engagement with space allows for a much broader debate around how we as people relate to architecture and space. While the work of the artists does address considerations of inclusive design, what it also challenges and encourages is a philosophical and creative engagement with multifunctional and often transgressive use of space. [5]

3   MAKING DISCURSIVE SPACES

The first project outlined here was a collaboration between disabled and Deaf artists interested in the built environment and interior architecture students at Brighton University, funded by the Arts Council. In the *Making Discursive Spaces* project (http://www.discursivespaces.co.uk) the artists were not framed (as is commonly the case) as users or clients but as mentors to, and colleagues in, the students' design projects. Through a short series of shared exchanges of work-in-progress, the aim was to explore what kind of 'discursive spaces' might begin to open up ways of re-thinking relationships between disability and design. Most immediately, for the students, working with disabled artists intensely heightened their own awareness of their everyday physical and sensory surroundings, usually too easily lived in a state of distractedness, particularly by the young and mobile. It offered ways of beginning from poetic practicalities rather than abstract creative concepts, focusing on capturing, analysing and responding to the immediacy of physical and sensual experiences between bodies, each other, objects and spaces. In addition, the project quickly unraveled any stereotypical assumptions about what disabled people are 'like', or what they 'need'. Starting from the narratives of the seven individual deaf and disabled artists involved blurred many boundaries around what counts as disability, how use and accessibility might be defined, and what constituted practical and/or creative responses to disability. It also required students and staff to face up to how we, the non-disabled, can be discomforted and make awkward by disabled people, especially the more that 'normal' standards of ability, appearance or behavior are not met.

3.1. Enter this place…

Out of the experiences of *Making Discursive Spaces* we began to develop other kinds of collaborations, which could explore these issues further. We put together a group called *Architecture-InsideOut* (http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk), also Arts Council funded, whose mission is 'to promote activity that develops and captures models of new practice for the built environment, led by the creativity and experiences of disabled and Deaf artists.' We wanted to see what happened when disabled artists worked directly in collaboration with architects and so set up a series of charrettes (short, intensive group design workshops). In May 2008, we took over the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London. 16 architects and 17 disabled and Deaf artists worked in eight collaborative teams, making work in response to the motto 'enter this place that is a joy to us'. This was deliberately open-ended – aimed at producing work not just for disabled people, but out of the creative intersections between the event's diverse participants. By treating each other as equals, and by having a similar number of disabled and non-disabled people, disability ceased to be the focus of the exercise (whilst remaining centrally important). By the end of the day, we had filled the Turbine Hall with installations and performances, many of which involved the public. In a variety of different ways, the work explored how to represent difference constructively and enjoyably, rather than starting from a conventional division between disabled and non-disabled 'needs'. For example, there was a performance called 'How many ways are there to get from A to B?' by artists Tony Heaton and Chris Ankin, with architects Ash Sakula. This asked people to try out different ways of crossing the Turbine Hall. Crowds of people, ran, slid, wheeled and cheered their way down the slope.

3.2 Learning lessons

The energy during, and feedback from, these events was very positive. Some of the participating architects have a longstanding interest in designing spaces for disabled people, but their experience was largely based on official guidance rather than direct experience. Working with many different disabled artists made disability an integral part of the creative process rather than something separate.

It opened up certain qualities of space to non-disabled people, qualities that they had not previously noticed. This direct experience – and the art gallery contexts – allowed everyone to explore the creative expression of relationships between disability and architecture. The exercises challenged the assumption that disabled peoples supposed problems can be solved with a technical and clinical approach to design. Instead, participants turned to positive, descriptive language containing words such as 'surprise', 'delight', 'evocative' 'sexy', 'colourful', 'sweet smelling' and 'dynamic'. As a result, everyone had a lot of fun. For the disabled artists, the *Architecture-InsideOut* project has presented intensive opportunities for collaboration, building confidence and experience in working with architects. It has offered a different way of engaging, beyond being categorised only as a disabled 'user' or becoming part of an access group. The contact made between participants is already leading to further collaborations and networks; and is also impacting on the artists' own creative practices.

4 TRANSFORMING PRACTICES

These events, however, are seen as just one stage in a process of developing a different approach to thinking about – and changing – relationships between disability and architecture. For *Architecture-InsideOut* it has meant thinking across educational development, professional practice and social inclusion as integrated, dialogic and equitable processes. From this position, everyone needs to be learning; and everyone brings some expertise. Thus, whilst a disability-led perspective is central, the artists involved are not articulated as some sort of 'authentic' voice of disabled people's needs. They need professional development in order to properly understand what the building and design sectors require, and to clearly articulate what it is they offer of value. Such training programmes could, of course, also interlock with new, innovative types of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for architects and related professionals; and be integrated in new, creative and productive ways into architectural and design education.

Similarly, there is the potential for many different kinds of partnerships on collaborative projects between disabled artists and architectural practices, product designers, planning offices, and so on. This might be on specific design issues, or perhaps through funding 'artist in residence' placements, or in other ways. To ensure equality and inclusion these need to be supported through the development of appropriate protocols for engagement. Then there is the importance of capturing this work as it happens, critically reflecting on it and making it the centre of continuing debate, knowledge sharing and improvement.

Finally, we need to develop a clearer understanding of – and better ways of explaining – what is distinctively innovative and important about this kind of approach to disability and design; and to find ways of making it resonant and useful to wider audiences. This is where the idea of Slow Space came from. We wanted an alternative conceptual framework to accessibility and inclusive design, preferably one that connected to existing debates, that did not isolate disability as a problem to be solved, and that integrated disability and inclusion issues with wider social concerns. We were interested in outlining a set of principles and practices that could underpin both socially responsive design, and an inclusive pedagogy. The notion of Slow also had an element of 'reclaiming' for disabled people. Slow can too often have negative connotations; that someone is a bit 'stupid', their movements restricted, laborious and therefore time-consuming, or needing 'support'. In a world which highly values mobility, speed, independence and personal autonomy, 'slow' is a problem; the response to taking time 'unnecessarily', to needing 'help', often one of irritation or awkwardness. But what is wrong with doing things slowly? What about thinking of slowness as the importance of taking notice; of attention to detail; of valuing sensory clarity and richness; of taking pleasure in diversity, complexity and human frailty; of enabling thoughtful and equal dialogue; and of respect for others and for resources?

4.1 The Slow Space manifesto

The Slow Space manifesto (http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/futures) was one way of developing an innovative set of principles around disability, linked to the Slow Food and Slow Cities[6] movements which are mainly concerned with sustainability and quality of life. Slow Space extends these ideas from a disability-led perspective to also make diversity - and respect for difference - central. But it is not just about disability, or only 'for' disabled people. Slow Space explores what happens both when we enjoy taking time in our lives; and when 'slowing things down' helps us closely, critically and creatively interrogate the particularities of our different social and spatial relationships. Rather than living our lives in a state of (harrassed) distraction, where we take the 'normal' for granted and fail to

notice other perspectives on the world, slow space offers opportunities for new kinds of close looking, considered thinking and creative action. Becoming intensively attentive to the details of everyday life and its spaces is central to the education and practice of architecture and design, yet it is something we find hard to both teach and learn – partly because it does take time to develop. This is design as a kind of radical craftwork:

(Craft) advocates a kind of patient attentiveness, a kind of waiting that is so often derided as a waste of time in an age obsessed with purpose, targets and goals (….) why is this kind of enduring enthusiasm regarded as 'weird' or 'sad'(….) Have our interests become so undemanding, easily dropped and often put towards another purpose (career, profit)? [7]

This notion of crafting has the potential to be highly conceptual rather than simply practical. Ideas can be generated from close attentiveness to the detailed quality of inter-relationships and everyday spatial practices, rather than starting from abstract ideas, which are then detailed 'up'. This sort of crafting joins the sensual with the social. It is not backward-looking, conservative or banal, but demands innovative thinking and practice, energy and social engagement.

The concept of Slow Space can also challenge the thoughtless unevenness and waste of the designed world, that is, the waste of both natural and human resources. Slow demands that we refuse to continue building barriers to equal participation in society and develop a more equitable and sustainable distribution of resources. This requires a critical awareness of everyday practices, an acceptance of ambiguity and difference, effective protocols for negotiated equality of exchange and a generosity in mutual support and interdependencies. Slow Space is thus not just about making better spaces and objects for disabled people - although it is also centrally concerned with this - but also about being part of larger progressive movements, linking both to the sustainability agenda and to other movements such as Slow Cities and those around health and wellbeing, and social inclusion. *Architecture-InsideOut* is now actively exploring possibilities for a collaborative Slow Space project with various partners.

4.2 Slow Learning Spaces: inculcating new approaches in design education

In parallel to *Architecture-InsideOut* another project is developing online educational resources on disability and architecture. *So What is Normal (SWIN)* (http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk), funded by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning through Design (CETLD) at the University of Brighton, aims to shift how disability is 'normally' articulated in design education, through the development and embedding of alternative discourses, approaches, methods and tools. As well as producing these resources, the project is exploring how to best engage creatively and constructively with contemporary design educational practices. This is because, first, pedagogic theory, and the associated resources produced, are often perceived by many tutors (particularly tutor-practitioners in the design disciplines) as implying a lack – a suggested failure in 'properly' teaching their subject to students; and framed in academic language that can seem very alien. A similar sense of feeling beleaguered can come from the perceived pressure on designers through 'special interest' groups such as the disabled, as well as the heritage and sustainability lobbies for example. Since tutor-practitioners as well as students are the main intended audience of SWIN, the aim is to make the resources intriguing, engaging, persuasive and even 'fashionable'. Second, this has also meant a focus on developing materials that are relevant to, and can be 'grasped' from the existing positions of architectural tutors and students, that is, relate to current concerns in architecture and design theory and practice. Finally, the resources are deliberately open-ended. This is both to respect the creative autonomy of academics (not telling them what to do) and to position disability issues in a way that is more attuned to how architectural and design education and practice generally 'thinks' than the usual disability guidance. Design centrally recognises itself as a process of transformation and questioning (problem-seeking), based on creative engagements with complex and problematic situations. It is not usually very interested in given 'solutions' (except where there is a feeling of being forced into such responses because of regulatory demands). Opening up questions about what the issues are, rather than telling people 'what to do', then, can creatively and constructively re-position disability in relation to design education.

4.3 Towards creating a better world

The *So What is Normal* online educational resources are therefore offered up as alternative type of discursive space around disability and architecture, for design educators and students to engage with as they wish. All the projects outlined here, the ideas and approaches they try to communicate, and the Slow Space manifesto itself, are intended not as 'the' way forward, but to offer a variety of creative and productive mechanisms for unraveling the congealed assumptions built into concepts of accessibility and inclusive design; and for beginning to articulate alternative approaches to design education and practice around disability.

But this research and its associated projects is also intended as a provocative challenge to the often invisible and un-thought through 'commonsense' of both design education and practice around what constitutes 'normality'. We can only begin to engage much more profoundly with issues of disability if we start from (dis)abilities, as a means to open up questions of difference, rather than ending with it as a 'special case' separate from, and added onto, our 'normal' design and educational procedures. This is not just about 'helping the disabled' then, but about how we can better conceptualise and design for difference and equality, as a central part of the whole design process.

What does this mean for design education? First, it involves shifting from designing a product or space 'for' a client or user's needs to instead challenging ones own preconceptions about who that user is and what they do. Second, it is about taking proper notice of the diverse narratives and strategies through which people live their lives. Third, it suggests a slow, in-depth, attentiveness to - and critique of – the 'ordinary' details of our everyday encounters with objects and spaces. This becomes is not so much about making functional improvements as about analyzing what is recognised as a 'normal' activity and what is left out, or made 'odd'. Finally, it becomes about challenging those aspects of 'normality' that leave disabled and Deaf people 'out' (as well as other disadvantaged groups) through innovative and creative interventions which instead celebrate and support what has previously been un-noticed or deemed problematic. There are many good examples of inclusive design educational projects that do this already; but these are still almost always a 'specialist' or 'one-off' part of student's education, separate to and outside of mainstream learning and teaching activities. Ultimately, it we want to create a better world for all its inhabitants, we have to see that while there are many barriers which prevent inclusion of disabled and Deaf people 'out there', in the material world, it is much more crucial that we critically explore how these are underpinned by the barriers 'in here', in our heads, in the assumptions of non-disabled people about what the problem is and how it should be solved. And that until the kind of design approach outlined above is 'normal' in design education, we will go on preventing disabled and Deaf people from their right to an ordinary participation in the world.

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