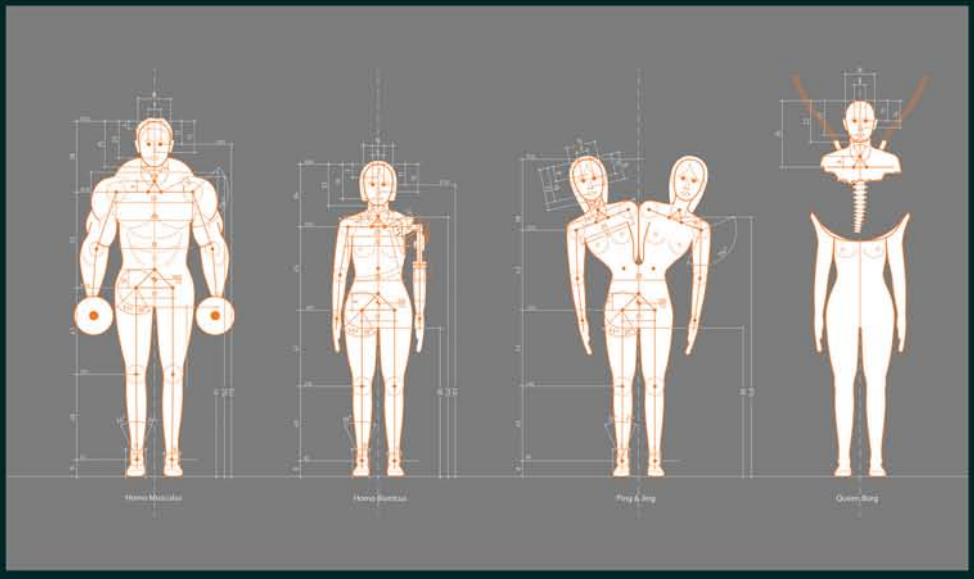
Edited by

Jos Boys

Disability, Space, Architecture

A Reader



ROUTLEDGE

DISABILITY, SPACE, ARCHITECTURE

Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader takes a groundbreaking approach to exploring the interconnections between disability, architecture and cities. The contributions come from architecture, geography, anthropology, health studies, English language and literature, rhetoric and composition, art history, disability studies and disability arts and cover personal, theoretical and innovative ideas and work.

Richer approaches to disability – beyond regulation and design guidance – remain fragmented and difficult to find for architectural and built environment students, educators and professionals. By bringing together in one place some seminal texts and projects, as well as newly commissioned writings, readers can engage with disability in unexpected and exciting ways that can vibrantly inform their understandings of architecture and urban design.

Most crucially, *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader* opens up not just disability but also ability – dis/ability – as a means of refusing the normalisation of only particular kinds of bodies in the design of built space. It reveals how our everyday social attitudes and practices about people, objects and spaces can be better understood through the lens of disability, and it suggests how thinking differently about dis/ability can enable innovative and new kinds of critical and creative architectural and urban design education and practice.

Jos Boys trained in architecture and has worked as a journalist, researcher, academic and community-based practitioner. As a non-disabled person she is particularly interested in how architects and other built environment professionals can act creatively and responsively as designers and policy-makers without misrepresenting or marginalising disabled people. Her previous book, *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Architecture, Dis/ability and Designing for Everyday Life*, grew out of a series of collaborations between disabled artists and architects, through a group she co-founded called Architecture-Inside Out. Previously Jos has written extensively about feminism and architecture. She was co-founder of Matrix, a feminist architectural design and research practice, and has been a member of the TakingPlace art and architecture collective.

'This diverse collection of essays proposes creative and critical ways of engaging in disability studies within the field of architecture. From rethinking technologies and design practices to reframing dis/ability across the theoretical and historical discourses of architecture, it challenges dominant assumptions about the embodied occupation of designed environments. Instead of simply framing disability as a problem to be solved by way of regulations and universal spatial solutions, embodied dis/abilities are explored as opportunities rather than impediments to design thinking and socio-spatial awareness.'

— Dr Hélène Frichot, KTH (Royal Institute of Technology), Sweden

'*Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader* is a critical and thought provoking collection of essays broadening the potential of dis/ability studies for designers, educators and academics. Seeking to radically relocate disability front and center within architectural discourse, the Reader positions disability as a transformative place to design and educate from. For the built environment to become more responsive and inclusive, we must not only acknowledge but also conceptualize differently the relationship between heterogeneous bodies and space as far more complex and intersectional, providing a trove of under examined spatial potential.'

— Lori A. Brown, Professor, School of Architecture, Syracuse University, USA

DISABILITY, SPACE, ARCHITECTURE

A Reader

Edited by Jos Boys

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Dedicated to Tobin Siebers, who is sorely missed

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CONTENTS

List of figures *x*
List of contributors *xiii*
Acknowledgements *xix*
Figure credits *xxi*

Introduction 1
JOS BOYS

Part I
Histories/narratives **7**

1 Disabling the *flâneur* 13
DAVID SERLIN (2006)

2 The body, disability and Le Corbusier's conception of the radiant environment 22
ROB IMRIE (1999)

3 A critical condition 33
PAUL HUNT (1966)

4 Lying down anyhow: disability and the rebel body 42
LIZ CROW (2013)

5 Blinding the power of sight 48
ROD MICHALKO (2015)

Part II
Theory and criticism **51**

6 Disability aesthetics 57
TOBIN SIEBERS (2006)

7 The body as a problem of individuality: a phenomenological disability studies approach 67
TANYA TITCHKOSKY AND ROD MICHALKO (2012)

8 Designing collective access: a feminist disability theory of universal design 78
AIMI HAMRAIE (2013)

9 More than access: overcoming limits in architectural and disability discourse 88
J. KENT FITZSIMONS (2016)

10 From steep steps to retrofit to universal design, from collapse to austerity: neo-liberal spaces of disability 102
JAY DOLMAGE (2016)

Part III
Education **115**

11 Including architecture: what difference can we make? 121
STEFAN WHITE (2016)

12 Diagramming for a dis/ordinary architecture 135
JOS BOYS (2016)

13 Un/shared space: the dilemma of inclusive architecture 155
MARGARET PRICE (2016)

14 The collapsing lecture 173
AARON WILLIAMSON (2010)

Part IV
Technologies/materialities **183**

15 Where does the person end and the technology begin? 189
PETER ANDERBERG (2006)

16 The prosthetic imagination: enabling and disabling the prosthesis trope 194
S. LOCHLANN JAIN (1999)

17 Electric moms and quad drivers: people with disabilities buying, making, and using technology in postwar America 198
BESS WILLIAMSON (2012)

18 Pissing without pity: disability, gender and the public toilet 213
DAVID SERLIN (2010)

19 Disability and the promises of technology: technology, subjectivity and embodiment within an order of the normal 227
INGUNN MOSER (2006)

Part V
Projects and practices **235**

20 Deaf Space 241
TODD BYRD (2007)

21 Along disabled lines: claiming spatial agency through installation art 247
AMANDA CACHIA (2016)

22 The Ramp House: building inclusivity 261
THEA MCMILLAN WITH KATIE LLOYD THOMAS (2016)

23 Resistant Sitting 272
SOPHIE HANDLER (2008)

24 Notes on an inclined plane – Slope : Intercept 278
SARA HENDREN (2016)

References *287*

Index *310*

FIGURES

1.1 Helen Keller (left) and her companion, Polly Thomson, window-shopping on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris. Originally published in *Le Soir* (Paris), 31 January 1937 14
1.2 Disabled veterans of the First World War demonstrating for increased pensions and benefits on the Avenue des Champs-Élysées, Paris. Photograph taken ca. December 1934 16
2.1 Le Corbusier's Unite d'Habitation, Marseille, completed in 1952 29
2.2 Contemporary photo of workers' housing at Pessac, built 1925: showing an example of how Le Corbusier's standardised design has been altered 30
4.1 Liz Crow (2012–13) *Bedding Out*, a live durational performance 47
6.1 Paul McCarthy 1977, *Hollywood Halloween*, performance, Los Angeles, CA 61
6.2 Paul McCarthy, 1973, *Plaster Your Head and One Arm into a Wall*, performance, Pasadena, CA 63
6.3 Judith Scott, *Untitled*, 1989. 30 × 11 × 6 inches. Collection de l'Art Brut 64
6.4 Judith Scott in action 1999. Oakland Studio, Creative Growth Center 65
9.1 View of a path through Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Stelenfeld, Berlin, Germany 90
9.2 View across Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, Stelenfeld, Berlin, Germany 94
9.3 SANAA (2010) Plan of Rolex Learning Center, Lausanne, Switzerland 96
9.4 Interior views of Rolex Learning Center showing constantly changing slopes 99
10.1 Stairs at Brunel University, UK 107
10.2 Ed Roberts Campus Ramp 110
11.1 Summary table of correlation between kinds of knowledge, models of difference and WHO Age-friendly City and Communities guidance 126
11.2 Adaptation of Robin Evans's 10 relationships of projection from "Projection and its analogues: The Arrested Image" in Evans, R. (1995) *The Projective Cast: Architecture and its Three Geometries*. MIT Press p367 128

11.3 Diagram of relationship between architectural discipline and society 130
11.4 MSA projects inclusive urban design method from presentation to the Belgian Ageing Studies programme, 2010 131
11.5 The Pankettes Choir, 2012 132
11.6 Old Moat: Age-friendly action plan detail, 2012 133
11.7 Old Moat: Age-friendly action plan workshop, 2012 133
12.1 Examples of diagramming development process and effects on design 138
12.2 'Cripping the Grid - 1', Generating architectural proportions based on a wheelchair user 142
12.3 'Cripping the Grid - 2', Absurdist attempt to generate architectural form from the movements of a wheelchair user 143
12.4 UN Studio (1999) 'Program and Movement' diagram for Arhem Station, Netherlands 146
12.5 'Having a Body': table outlining some of the characteristics of everyday materials and spatial embodiments 149
12.6 Adapted diagram for Arhem Station, as example of mapping differential perceptions and experiences of space 150
12.7 Thomas Carpentier (2011) *The Measure(s) of Man:* graduation design project from the Ecole Speciale d'Architecture, Paris 152
12.8 Thomas Carpentier (2011) Re-interpretation of the Modulor by Le Corbusier 154
13.1 Accessible entrance sign on a university campus 155
13.2 Accessible entrance sign on a university campus, showing inaccessibility 158
13.3 Front entrance to university campus building 159
14.1 Aaron Williamson (2011) 'Flannel' 'Parlour Principia' performance evening, Swedenborg House, London, May 13 (duration 1 hour) 174
14.2 Aaron Williamson (2015) Demonstrating the World. Performances at Rainham Sheds and Experimentica Festival, Chapter, Cardiff 181
17.1 Faucet turners in "Homemaking," *Toomey J Gazette* 1968, 18 206
17.2 "Mouthsticks," *Toomey J. Gazette* Spring 1960, 8 207
17.3 Para-Car, in "Equipment," *Toomey J Gazette*, 1968, 54 210
18.1 Contemporary (ca. 2010) photograph of wall-size display map for multi-user public restrooms, Kyoto, Japan 216
18.2 Contemporary (ca. 2010) photograph of the interior of single-user accessible toilet stall, Hamburg, Germany 219
18.3 Bathroom queue for ladies and disabled, London Chelsea Flower Show, May 2004 222
18.4 Contemporary (ca. 2015) photograph of signage for a single-user "All Gender" toilet at San Diego International Airport, USA 224
20.1 Examples from the DeafSpace Design Guidelines 246
21.1 Corban Walker (1997) *Trapezoid*, Ridinghouse Editions, London, March 6th – April 19th (catalogue) 250
21.2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man*, c. 1487, pen and ink with wash over metal point on paper 252
21.3 Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, 1887–1965) *Le Modular* 1945 253

21.4 Wendy Jacob (2007) *Between Spaces*, Wolk Gallery and Rotch Library, MIT, September 20, 2007 255
21.5 Wendy Jacob (2005) *Line, Cambridge,* Performance at 21 Bowdoin St, Cambridge, Massachusetts 256
21.6 Wendy Jacob with Stefano Micali (2009) *Explorer's Club*, Boston, MA 257
21.7 John D. Schiff (1907–1976). Installation View of Exhibition 'First Papers of Surrealism' Showing String Installation. 1942. Gelatin silver print. 7 5/8 × 10 inches (19.4 × 25.4cm) 258
22.1 Greta with one of the development models for the Ramp House 263
22.2 Development model with comments inscribed on the surfaces 264
22.3 Chambers McMillan Architects (2011). Interior view, Ramp House, Portobello, Edinburgh 2011 270
23.1 Cushioned Bollard: technical drawing. Ageing Facilities: diagram from *Resistant Sitting: The Pensioner's Alternative Street Furniture Guide* 276
23.2 Cushioned Bollard; completed project 277
24.1 Claude and Naad Parent with guests, in their Neuilly house, 1973 281
24.2 Sara Hendren; suite of objects for ramp design 282
24.3 Ramps configured for skateboarding 283
24.4 Ramp configured for single-step entrances 284
24.5 Homepage, www.slopeintercept.org 285

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INTRODUCTION

Jos Boys

Disability sits in a peculiar position within architecture and urban design. Whilst readers and anthologies already exist that explore architecture and other identities of difference – such as gender (Matrix 1984, Weisman 1994, Massey 1994, Agrest et al. 1996, Hughes 1998, Borden et al. 1999), sexuality (Colomina 1992, Sanders 1996, Betsky 1997) and race (Lokko 2000, Barton 2001, Wilkins 2007) – disability as a concept, and disabled people as a constituency, continue to be assumed as completely separate from social or cultural politics. Within the discipline of architecture disability remains predominantly framed by design guidance and building regulations on the one hand, and by a 'common sense' language of accessibility and inclusive/universal design on the other. Neither of these approaches is wrong. What is extraordinary is that both because of and despite these existing framings, disability has somehow remained consistently stuck in a non-historical, atheoretical and – most crucially – *seriously underexplored* category in relationship to building design practices. It is invisible in both avant-garde and mainstream architectural theories and discourses, just as it is a persistent absence in critical and cultural theory more generally (Davis 2002, Davidson 2008). Perhaps this illustrates just how deeply disability remains widely avoided, compared to other disadvantaged identities. Unlike gender, race or sexuality then – and the feminist, post-colonial and queer studies which underpin associated scholarship and debate – it seems that we assume 'disability' to be unable to bring any kind of criticality or creativity to the discipline of architecture.

This Reader, then, is long overdue. It aims to break new ground by refusing to think of disability as an obvious and straightforward category – as mostly a design problem demanding a design solution. Rather, the many different contributors to this book understand disability *and* ability as ambiguous and relational; as shaped as much by everyday social and spatial practices as by specific impairments; and as a potentially powerful means to critically and creatively investigate, speculate about, and generate designs for built space. In fact, a big claim underpins these texts across their diverse perspectives and approaches – a belief that *starting from disability* can open up innovative and unexpected understandings across the

whole range of architectural education and practices; its histories and theories; its attitudes towards, and deployment of, technologies; and in its design processes and practices.

What can architecture learn from disability?

To begin to do this, *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader* introduces students, educators and practitioners of architecture, planning and other built environment disciplines to some important emerging work that tries to think differently about disability *and* ability – dis/ability – and built space. In fact a rich seam of theoretical and critical thought already exists, but seems to have had almost no impact on architectural and related discourses, a huge gap for the subject. Through the developing field of disability studies, disability arts practice and disability activism, there are now many scholars, artists and advocates examining how disability intersects with social, spatial and material practices. Many of these studies and projects have a direct relevance to architecture. Most immediately this is because recent design thinking has increasingly re-centred the body. There has been a renewed interest in theories such as phenomenology, materialism, post-humanism and Deleuzian philosophy that help us to think harder about embodied experiences and what these mean for the design of built space. In moving away from modernist architecture and its dreams of a universal user (see Imrie this volume) there has been much concern with how to articulate bodies-in-space in a more sensual, dynamic and non-deterministic manner. Here, disability studies is both critiquing assumptions about what kinds of bodies *matter* in contemporary theories and commentaries, and opening up innovative kinds of critical and creative investigation of dis/ability as an embodied experience (Boys 2014, see also Serlin, Chapter 1, this volume). This is a wide-ranging engagement, intersecting with many of the theoretical frameworks currently influencing architectural thinking, as well as offering new insights into how social, spatial and material practices operate between and across dis/ability, race, sexuality, gender and class (see, in particular, Titchkosky and Michalko, Hamraie, White, and Serlin (Chapter 18), this volume). In addition, with contemporary shifts towards bio-mimicry, intelligent building and augmented reality in architecture, understanding the shifting inter-relationships between bodies and technologies are also becoming central. Here too, critiques and engagements with dis/ability can open up new ways of thinking (see Jain, Bess Williamson, Moser, and Serlin (Chapter 18), this volume).

Architecture and urban design can also learn by thinking differently about dis/ability through acknowledging, and engaging with, the considerable expertise of disabled people – as scholars, activists and as especially experienced users of built space. As Tobin Siebers puts it:

> disabled people have to be ingenious to live in societies that are by their design inaccessible and by their inclination prejudiced against disability. It requires a great deal of artfulness and creativity to figure out how to make it through the day when you are disabled, given the condition of our society.
>
> (From interview with Mike Levin, 2010 online)

Rather than, as too often happens, disabled people being treated as passive users of buildings and services, we need to realize that starting from the many diverse perspectives

and experiences of disability and impairment offers something powerful back to architects and other built environment professionals. Taking notice of the narratives of disabled people themselves (see for example, Hunt, Crow, Michalko, Aaron Williamson, Anderberg, and Byrd this volume) offers new and creative ways of articulating how built space works from the perspective of 'unruly bodies' (Mintz 2007) and 'misfits' (Garland-Thompson 2011) rather than assumed normal and unnoticed forms of embodiment.

This is not only in terms of working towards more inclusive design improvements, but also about revealing architecture's deepest assumptions about what is valued and noticed, and what is marginalized and forgotten, in the processes of design. There are now many writers and artists specifically exploring inter-relationships between dis/ability, space and aesthetics in ways that connect very directly into debates and projects currently going on within architecture and other built environment disciplines (see Siebers, Dolmage, Price, and Cachia this volume). Some of this work is coming out of architectural education and practice itself, as well as from associated design fields. There is clearly an emerging interest in going beyond the reductivist logic of design guidance and building regulation, providing some productive explorations of what can happen when you start explicitly from differently abled bodies in built space (see Fitzsimons, White, Boys, McMillan and Lloyd Thomas, Handler, and Hendren this volume).

About this anthology

The contributors to *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader* come from a wide range of disciplines including architecture, geography, anthropology, health studies, English language and literature, rhetoric and composition, art history, disability studies and disability arts and performance. They produce work in diverse ways, from the personal to the theoretical, offering a range of perspectives and attitudes, which this anthology hopes to reflect in its overall selection of pieces. This has not aimed to be comprehensive, but instead to capture the flavours of an emerging set of intersections between and across disability, space and architecture.

The most immediate aim has been to bring together in one place some important and relevant texts and projects about dis/ability and built space, as well as expanding the field by commissioning new writing. Disability studies is an increasingly strong area of study, but one that remains fragmented and under-recognized, with its scholars spread worldwide and across many different university departments. Disabled artists who make creative work exploring aspects of dis/ability – like people interested in disability within architecture – are also often invisible or marginalized within these disciplines. The uneven global spread of scholars, artists and activists is equally expressed in where the reprinted pieces were originally published, often in non-mainstream or unexpected journals and publications. Nonetheless, there is clearly an expanding body of innovative and engaging work going on, which I hope will be as appealing and enlightening to you, the reader, as it was for me when I first discovered it. There are also, without a doubt, many important examples left out; and hopefully many more to be written and created. Some seminal publications are also listed in the 'recommended reading' section at the end of this introduction, to enable readers to place the pieces here in their broader context.

Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader is divided into five parts – histories/narratives, theory and criticism, education, technologies/materialities and projects and practices. This is partly to demonstrate the considerable potential of dis/ability in asking interesting questions across the whole discipline of architecture; and partly to make it easier for readers to engage with preferred areas of interest. However, many of the pieces also 'cross-over' in their concerns, so these divisions can also be ignored, if preferred.

1 Histories/narratives aims to open up new spaces in architectural history, theory and design by introducing a number of both interpretative and personal disability histories. In a variety of ways these each critically engage with both assumptions of what constitutes a 'normal' body and what it means to start from disabled perspectives and experiences of impairment.
2 Theory and criticism explores some approaches that enable disability, space and architecture to be thought about together in innovative and challenging ways. It illustrates some of the kinds of critical and creative critiques that starting from dis/ability can offer to architectural and design theory and criticism.
3 Education offers examples of where rethinking dis/ability beyond design guidance and building regulations has the potential to generate alternative ways of teaching architectural design and of imagining different kinds of built space.
4 Technologies/materialities explores the critical and creative disruptions enabled by starting from dis/ability when thinking about augmented bodies and smart spaces and materials. Rather than be seduced by 'cyborg' technologies, the selected pieces reveal the more complex and nuanced understandings that come from both investigating the more 'debased' technologies usually associated with disabled people, and by taking notice of disabled perspectives on living with prosthetics.
5 Projects and practices brings together examples of work that illustrate some of the vibrant new projects being undertaken at the creative intersections between dis/ability and built spaces.

One final note. Most of the writers and practitioners here follow one of the central tenets of disability studies – research and practice must be more than an academic endeavour: it must also aim to improve the position of disabled people in society. Whilst architecture as it is taught and practised also has a strong underlying social commitment, this usually remains too vague and generalized to have any recognizable mainstream impact. This is particularly true of dis/ability that – as I noted at the beginning of this introduction – remains under-theorized and under-developed, across both mainstream and radical and community-based architecture. This concern for real change and improvement is also an aim of *Disability, Space, Architecture: A Reader*. By enabling easy access to a previously unknown or ignored body of work, the ultimate intention is to open up debate, and to generate new kinds of conversations, attitudes and approaches. By offering productive and interesting ways of engaging with dis/ability, all the contributors to this anthology hope to increasingly make it a *normal* part of architectural discourse and practices, rather than something to be avoided, feel awkward about, or 'contain' within the category inclusive design, or a merely regulatory demand. Longer term, the intended impact on the discipline

is not only about making more accessible places (although this remains essential), but also about rethinking the very shape of architecture itself – finding ways to shift attitudes and approaches to disability *and* ability, and expanding explorations of what the critical and creative implications of this might be for architectural education, scholarship and practice.

Recommended further reading

Boys, J. (2014) *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Dis/Ability, Architecture and Designing for Everyday Life,* London and New York: Routledge.

Corker, M. and Shakespeare, T. (eds) (2002) *Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, London: Continuum.

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

Davis, L. J. (ed.) (1997) *The Disability Studies Reader*, London: Routledge.

Michalko, R. (2002) *The Difference that Disability Makes,* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Seibers, T. (2008) *Disability Theory*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Seibers, T. (2010) *Disability Aesthetics*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Snyder, S. L., Brueggemann, B. and Garland-Thomson, R. (2002) (eds) *Disability Studies: Enabling the Humanities*, New York: Modern Language Association of America.

Titchkosky, T. (2011) *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Titchkosky, T. and Michalko, R. (eds) (2009*) Re-thinking Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reader*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press Inc.

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PART I

Histories/narratives

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I suggested in the introduction that disability tends to be mainly treated within architecture in a completely ahistorical way. This may be by assuming that disabled people can be defined through a series of unproblematic and unchanging categories such as wheelchair user, deaf, blind or visually impaired. Or that disability itself, and its relationship to the built environment, has no history (or not one that is worth investigating) but is simply a matter of technicalities – design guidance and legal requirements. Or that explicitly introducing disability as a concept and/or disabled people's perspectives and experiences into architectural history is too problematic or marginal to consider.

Yet, looking at disability through time (both through historical study and via personal narratives) reveals a considerable amount about how particular kinds of bodies become normalised in different periods and places; how what comes to be considered normal depends equally crucially on the framing and marginalisation of *non-normal* bodies; how built space is implicated in these processes; and how 'what is normal' changes – that is, comes to be implemented, perpetuated, adapted, contested and transformed through time.

A central thread within disability studies has been to unravel the interrelationships between changing concepts of the ideal/normal/average body and the disabled body – with its persistent naming as monster and freak, that is, as less than human (Davis 1997; Garland-Thomson 1996; Stiker 2000; Stephens 2011). This is often a horrifying history for disabled people, linked as it has been to ideas about perfectible versus degenerate bodies in eugenics (leading for example to the mass murder of disabled people by the Nazis – see Silberman 2015) and to the continuing enforced incarceration and maltreatment of those with disabilities in many countries (Ben-Moshe et al. 2014; Soldatic et al. 2014). Definitions of what constitute 'good' and 'bad' bodies also underpin our assumptions about work, both assuming and demanding a specific type of productive and competent body, which act to marginalise the more fragile and vulnerable as non-productive and thus without value (Ervelles 1996, 2011). Importantly, discrimination and de-valuing of disabled people is not something that can be relegated to the past. Paul Hunt's eloquent analysis of his situation as a disabled man – 'A critical condition' originally published in 1966 and reprinted here – not only reminds us that disabled people have been segregated and institutionalised until very recently (and still are in many places and contexts), but also how crucial disabled people themselves have been to campaigns for accessibility and universal/inclusive design; in his case through the founding of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS).

Understanding the contested history of bodily norms also means looking more critically at how these have been translated into 'standard' architectural practices – that is, have become part of everyday common sense designers' assumptions about bodies-in-space. What, for example, are the links between earlier eugenic beliefs and the typical ergonomic and anthropometric data that are still used mechanically in architectural education and practice today, based as these are on standardised and 'average' bodies (Lambert 2012; Lambert and Pham 2015)? Or we can ask what kinds of bodies are assumed in campaigns for shared spaces (Imrie 2012, 2013), active design guidance (Price, this volume; see also Keller 2016) or sustainability and environmentalism (Kafer 2013)? The first essay in this section, by David Serlin, explores how we can trouble a particular kind of figure – the *flâneur* – that continues to have a lot of resonance within architectural education and practice as well as across other disciplines. Serlin argues that this concept of a leisured street-walker, who has

been an icon of urban modernity since the 19th century, needs to be made problematic and re-evaluated from a disability perspective. He does this by opening up the intersections between and across the sensorial and tactile experiences of disabled people, thus challenging the able-bodied privileges embodied in *flanerie* (for an equivalent feminist critique see, for example, Wolff 1985, 2008).

The second piece in this section is by geographer Rob Imrie, one of the very few people who has been exploring over many years how to think critically about disability and the built environment in relation to its design and regulatory practices. 'The body, disability, and Le Corbusier's concept of the radiant environment' from 1999, is a seminal example of such an approach, and critically engages with the problematic norm of the 'modern' body.

Both Liz Crow and Rod Michalko, in their essays in this anthology, also aim to trouble assumptions about what 'proper' bodies do, and what 'improper' bodies should not do. In 'Lying down anyhow: disability and the rebel body' Crow reminds us of some of the taken-for-granted everyday social, spatial and material practices about what is acceptable to do and where. In public spaces, to be ordinary and normal (and therefore to be both someone who takes no notice and who can go unnoticed) is to be independent, autonomous, mobile and have the appearance of mental competence. Lying down in public, on the other hand, aligns you with 'suspect' types – homeless, vagrant, mentally suspect – and with shirking, with not working in the normal manner. In her artistic practice, Crow has also explored this assumption of a clear private/public divide in acceptable behaviours as experienced by disabled people through her ongoing project, Bedding Out (http://www.roaring-girl.com/).

For Rod Michalko, the experience of going blind has also been about the experience of sighted peoples' unease. Michalko has written extensively and brilliantly about blindness and disability in ways that intertwine personal narrative with theoretical investigation (1998a, 1998b, 2002). In 'Blinding the power of sight' he details just one everyday encounter to unravel two interrelated aspects. This is, first, how 'normal' social and spatial practices – the assumptions of the sighted – are confused and disrupted by disability; and second, the gap between living with and knowing blindness as a *normal* life, and its common sense amongst the non-disabled as a difference so fearful as to be worse than death, so terrible as to freeze up their ordinary social interactions. Crucially, in both these pieces, the 'problem' is not disability per se, but operates in the complex and contested encounters between disability *and* ability. Histories and narratives, then, need to expose the ableism embodied in everyday 'common sense' about how the world works, just as much as it increases our understandings of disability history (Campbell 2009).

As the next part, theory and criticism, shows in more depth, much of the work in disability studies has been informed by an interest in theories of the everyday; in ways of better understanding how particular types of bodies come to be normalised through specific social, spatial and material practices that not only affect how we talk about dis/ability but are also embodied and situated, that is, are constantly enacted through the 'ordinary' things we *do*. If architecture as a discipline is also to better understand how built space intertwines with such everyday practices which 'just happen' to locate normal bodies and disabled bodies *differently and differentially,* then we need to begin to critically and creatively interrogate the many histories of how social, spatial and material practices have