Chapter

Harnessing Different Dimensions of Space: The Built Environment in *Auti*-Biographies

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#.1 Introduction

An understanding of diversity is a key principle in the development of theories, tools and techniques of design for inclusion. In assembling new perspectives for inclusive design, we want to gain a more accurate insight into the diversity of people's interaction with the designed environment. People with autism spectrum disorders, for example, due to their particular way of thinking, make sense of their surrounding world in a unique way. Starting from this notion, our research questions the relevance of the meaning attributed to the built environment in our society, by studying the interaction between the world of experience of people with autism and the design of the built environment.

In this paper, we investigate the way people with autism talk about space and the importance they attach to their physical environment, as reflected in stories and autobiographies of people with autism themselves—in short, *auti*-biographies. By analysing their own descriptions, we try to gain more insight into an autistic way of thinking and acting in relation to the built environment.

#.2 Architectural Design and Autism

In our society, designers have a significant impact on daily life. They commit themselves to certain ideas, which take shape in the artefacts they conceive. Also in architecture, a design embodies the designers' line of thought. In this way, the tangible space, which is the materialisation of an architectural design, carries a whole ideological background. However, most people are only exposed to the concrete realisation of the architectural design, to the physical space surrounding them. Yet the way a person deals with this surrounding space and brings it into use,

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does not only depend on the design of the physical space, infused with the ideas of the architect; it is to a large extent based on the personal interpretation this person attaches to the physical environment. Jakob von Uexküll (1934) elaborates how the same physical entity can play different roles in the worlds—*die Umwelten*—of different people. Following this line of thought, Marta Dischinger (2006) points out that in wayfinding different features may become landmarks, depending on the person's interests, attention and perceptual possibilities. The specific disposition of a person can lead to a different interpretation of the environment, which can develop into another use of space. Whatever the disposition from which an architect designs a certain environment, eventually, people interpret the built environment from a personal disposition and they use their surrounding space based on this particular interpretation.

Starting from a wide diversity of people, this paper focuses on the interpretation of the environment and the use of space by people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD), namely autism. Up till now, ASD is still diagnosed on account of a characteristic behaviour, known as restricted and repetitive actions (Wing, 1997; Noens & Van IJzendoorn, 2007). Nevertheless, the true essence of autism, underlying this distinctive behaviour, is supposed to be situated in a characteristic difference in cognitive functioning (Noens & van Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004). Their specific 'distinct' way of perceiving and information processing causes people with ASD to make sense of their surrounding world in a unique way (de Roeck, 1997).

Both the characteristic autistic behaviour and the particularly different way of sense-making of people with autism, influence their spatial experience and their interaction with space. This is a central argument to explore the confrontation between people with autism spectrum disorders and their built environment.

#.3 Through the Words of Themselves

In trying to gain insight into the way people with ASD interpret their built environment and how they deal with space, we do not intend to analyse various scientific points of view or general considerations concerning the varied disorders of the autism spectrum; nor do we intend to investigate the behavioural 'anomalies', interpreted according to our own standards. Instead, our starting point is the way people with autism—themselves—think about their interaction with space, getting to the bottom of their own reflections on it. Since Susan Reynolds Whyte established that people with disabilities experience a general tension between the personal values—shaped by their personal experiences with disability—and the general values of larger society (Albrecht, 2003), we want to emphasize their personal values, drawing attention to their personal verbal accounts of the physical environment, and to question what they can impart to the general values.

However, the way to gain access to the range of thought of people with autism is not obvious. Even though ASD includes a wide spectrum of disorders, showing a large range of capabilities, impairments in social interaction and communication are common characteristics of the autistic spectrum (Wing, 1997; Noens & van

Berckelaer-Onnes, 2004). Nevertheless, a few people with autism find a way to pour out their thoughts and feelings by writing them down (Klonovsky, 1993). Some of them write in detail characteristic memories of their life (*e.g.* Gunilla Gerland, Daniel Tammet, Liane Holliday Willey), while others write their experiences and feelings in letters or diaries (*e.g.* Landschip², Birger Sellin, Dietmar Zöller) or they make their thoughts known in a leaflet (*e.g.* Lourens Bijlsma, Brad Rand, Jim Sinclair). The written reflections on their own life allow us to catch a glimpse of an autistic way of thinking. In this paper, those published autobiographies of people with autism—so-called *auti*-biographies—are used as a particular source to analyse the importance of the physical environment, the interpretation of this environment and the corresponding way of dealing with the built environment by people with autism. To start with, we will discuss the role of physical space in a number of *auti*-biographies, selected on the dual condition of having been written [1] by people with autism and [2] about experiences of their own lives (Bijlsma 2000; Dumortier 2002; Gerland 1996; Landschip & Modderman 2004; Rand 1997; Sellin 1993; Sinclair 1993; Tammet 2006; Van Dalen 1994; Willey 1999; Zöller 1989). Analysing which meaning the authors ascribe to the built environment and how they behave themselves in dealing with the surrounding space, we want to identify some characteristic thoughts in their reflections on the built environment.

#.4 Divergent Dimensions of Space

#.4.1 The Confidence in Physical Space

'My consolation, my safe retreat in the world, was a brown armchair in one corner. I could just fit in behind it. With my face close to the back of it, I would stare into the upholstery so that I could see every tiny little bit of it. I became absorbed in the brown material, in its threads, in the minute holes between the threads. [...] There was no energy to be found there, but there was rest, a way of keeping my mouth shut and holding on to a little of the energy that had otherwise been spent in trying to understand what was incomprehensible, how everything hung together.'

(Gerland, 1996)

The incomprehensibility of society is a frequently recurring theme in the studied autobiographies of people with autism. Contemporary society does not give the authors something to hold on to in understanding what this world is all about; their life stories reveal a continuous struggle for some grip on the world around them.

In pursuit of a sense of certainty in this world, physical space is presented as a fixed and self-evident feature of the environment, as a physical entity that gives the sense of grip the authors are looking for. The physical space offers some grip, not only metaphorically, but also in the literal sense of the word: it is visible and tangible, one can perceive it. Physical space simply *is*, and gives a sense of certainty unlike the transient information and the concepts of life that are not

² Landschip is a Dutch pseudonym, which can be translated as 'Landship'.

directly perceptible, such as the inner self of human beings. In this respect, physical entities, either single objects or whole spaces, seem to inspire more confidence than people. “People were never safety points to me,” Gunilla Gerland (1996) writes, whereas objects could mean a reassurance, even in new and incalculable environments. Physical entities were the anchorages to the world, not other people. “I didn’t want to move house, most certainly not. Our house and garden were my security. The house was closer to me than people were.”

However, Gerland mentions that, after all, from a physical point of view there is no essential difference between people and objects. Even human bodies, or *empty faces*, can be seen as physical entities in space. “Those [empty] faces were as lacking in content as furniture, and I thought that, just like furniture, they belonged in the rooms I saw them in.” Consequently, “sitting on the lap of a stranger, on the lap of an empty face, hadn’t been any more difficult than sitting on an armchair” (Gerland, 1996). Other anti-biographers note the same essential similarity between people and objects. According to Brad Rand (1997): “When I’m not concentrating on people, they just look like shapes, like furniture and trees are shapes.” When it turns out that people are not only stage-property, that there is some inner self behind these other entities labelled as human beings, and that they too have a personal state of mind, it is no surprise that—being not on the same wavelength to understand these underlying characteristics—human beings cause an unsafe feeling. The meaningful world behind human beings arouses some unpredictability and uncertainty. “Because of important reasons,” Birger Sellin (1993) writes, “I can find safety only in things. People are incalculable and distinct monsters.” The nonhuman predictable behaviour and iron regularity are thing-like traits that people can only try hard to simulate, and in this way, “people with autism are offered more grip, sometimes even literally so, by nonhumans than by humans” (Hendriks 1998).

The predictability and—perhaps indisputable—perceptibility of the physical space inspire confidence to the authors of the selected anti-biographies. In the descriptions of Gunilla Gerland (1996), this confidence is even enhanced by the sense of confirmation of her inner feelings, evoked by the physical environment. She likes to wander round the residential area at night, lonely, and writes: “The world was quieter then, and it looked just as deserted as it felt. That tallied. [...] I liked it when things tallied, when there was both an internal and an external emptiness.” Gerland longs to relate the environment to her own senses. Furthermore, she explains her bent towards curved objects, her desire to touch them, triggered by the feeling of being so ‘straight’ inside. “It’s because my nervous system is rectilinear that I need to acquire a curve from outside. As if, when I really need an inner curve so as not to be so rigid, I have to find it somewhere outside myself.” In both cases, the surrounding space, either as a mirror or as a complement of her own inner sense, ensures her own feelings.

The sense of certainty and confidence experienced in relation to the physical environment makes the anti-biographers seek comfort in tangible space rather than with other human beings. Gunilla Gerland (1996), faced with the threat of losing track of herself when the certainties in the social world were lost, slipped in behind the brown armchair, to find a safe retreat to be left in peace. And Liane H. Willey

(1999), whenever she began to feel as though she would come unravelled, crawls into the symmetrical alcove under her bed, until she felt “as square and symmetrical as the alcove itself.” There she could always find herself. The tangible space is able to offer a place to come to senses again, as a safety point amidst an incomprehensible society.

#.4.2 The Hidden Logic of the Built Environment

Even though in most stories of people with autism the physical space features as a source of certainty, there are more sides to the physical environment, brought into use by society. Each of the considered anti-biographies reveals an unpredictable feeling with regard to the built environment, resulting from problems or ‘maladjusted’ behaviour they experience in dealing with the physical environment.

A recurring problem concerns orientation and wayfinding. Several anti-biographers describe situations in which they lose their spatial orientation, in outside environments as well as inside a building. J.G.T. van Dalen (1994), diagnosed to be slightly autistic, writes how easily he loses his way. Even in familiar environments, he has to think a lot to find the right way. Also Landschip describes that, although he practised the route between two points, he is still not able to find again this way under various circumstances, snow, a broken road, ... (Landschip & Modderman, 2004). Dominique Dumortier (2002) mentions similar problems of orientation, even inside a building: after visiting a new apartment, she does not succeed in pointing out the right door to the exit. And Liane H. Willey (1999) and Daniel Tammet (2006) describe how they hopelessly have to rely on trial and error to find their way inside the school building.

Gunilla Gerland (1996) nuances her wayfinding through the school. She is not only aware of her problems to find the right way, but also of the differences between her and her classmates in using this building. This realisation causes some doubt about the certainty of the perceived environment: “There *must* be a sign of some sort on the doors,” she writes, “because the others didn’t hesitate over where they should go.” Her problems in dealing with the environment, but especially the realisation of a different use or interpretation of the environment compared to others, makes Gerland question which innate abilities enable the others to retrieve this logic. Despite the certainty offered by the fixed physical space, the conceived organisation and assumed logic behind the tangible space causes confusion. In the same way, Van Dalen (1994), impervious to a functional meaning of the built environment, is aware of his ‘dysfunctional’ reactions: “For example, I often experienced that I pushed the open-button to close the doors of the elevator and the other way around.” The button to close an elevator is usually indicated by two thick vertical lines, widely separated, which—from a structural point of view—represent an opened door. However, the meaning of this button is grasped in the two functional arrows between those lines, pointing to each other to represent the act of closing doors. The connotations and meanings attributed to the built environment in our society can lead to situations in which people with autism do not behave themselves according to the rules people without ASD inherently connect to it.

Aware of their problems or—compared to others—‘maladjusted’ behaviour in dealing with the built environment, most authors describe how they consciously try to develop strategies to get round these difficulties, and how they try to blur some differences towards outsiders. It is a search for tricks that allow them to function in an apparently spontaneous way (Dumortier, 2002), a search for skills as a compensation of the missing automatic pilot (Landschip & Modderman, 2004).

In her attempt to harmonize her behaviour with the way of dealing with the environment she noticed with others, Gunilla Gerland (1996) developed theories that—in her opinion—are a useful aid in making sense of what was happening. Her theories became a truth that had an impact on how she tried to understand the world. “I desperately wanted to understand, and this led to theories: if everything looked in a certain way in the living-room—the sun shining in through the curtains, the ashtray on the table with a newspaper beside it—and if Kerstin then came back from school ... I thought that everything had to look exactly the same the next day, for her to come back from school. And in fact, it often was.” Strikingly enough, the anti-biographers, developing strategies to compensate for the experienced ignorance of a hidden logic behind the built environment, unconditionally connect their theories to the immediately perceptible space. Even the unpredictable side of the built environment is indemnified by reverting to the physical certainty of space.

#.5 Interpreting Their Words

#.5.1 A Conscious Perception of Space

A rough overview of the role of the built environment in the considered anti-biographies reveals that the authors’ perception and interpretation of the built environment—and its divergent dimensions—are shaped by a recurring way of experiencing space: the continuous consciousness of physical space as a tangible entity.

Presenting the physical environment as an anchorage of confidence in the world, as a safety point contrary to human beings, this reliability seems to have its roots in the tangibility and perceptibility of space. The idea of perceiving humans as a physical entity, just like objects and spaces are physical entities, illustrates the essential logic behind the conscious way of perceiving their environment. The unsafe feeling caused by human beings is due to the unpredictable aspects of an ‘inner self’—hidden behind the physical, which cannot be perceived just like that.

In the same way, the experienced unpredictable side of the built environment stems from what exceeds the directly perceptible. The way the physical environment is brought into use in our society often requires more sense than what is really tangible. To succeed in orienting yourself and finding the right way, for example, it is necessary—even in familiar environments—to be able to imagine what is not immediately present, placing the real perception in a general conception of the environment. When viewing a certain door, Dominique Dumortier (2002) could not—just like that—imagine the space into which that door gives entrance. And walking through the city, she is not able to imagine

where a certain street will end, even if she walked it a few times before. According to van Dalen (1994), even the smallest change of his point of view makes him perceive an almost totally new environment, and failing to relate one image to the other explains his problems in wayfinding. Merely building on directly perceptible aspects to interpret the built environment apparently can lead to problems in dealing with space or ‘maladjusted’ behaviour, compared to others. Moreover, attributing meaning to the built environment in our society, we begin with a range of non-perceivable, non-concrete information, which gives the tangible space an extra dimension. The built environment surpasses the physical space, and in this field, the authors mentioned above experience their problems, which strongly suggests that their interpretation of the world is mostly based on immediate perceptions of the physical space.

The auto-biographers’ consciousness of the tangible space is also present in their reaction to both the predictable and the unpredictable characteristics of the built environment. Developing strategies to compensate for the experienced problems in interaction with the built environment, the authors describe how they fall back on their experience of an inherent certainty of the existing tangible space. Landschip, for example, to control his movements and actions, explicitly refers to his position in relation to the surrounding space. He explains that the quality of co-ordination between his eyes and hands—a skill in which he excels at certain moments, whereas at other moments it leaves much to be desired—does not only depend on which activity he is doing, but often “it goes well as soon as I ‘positioned’ myself in space.” It is the tangible environment that gives him the sense of certainty to position himself in space and for this reason, he writes, he feels more safe when he travels by bike than when he goes by foot: “That bicycle is literally and metaphorically something to hold on to, an anchor, a point of departure that makes me know, all the time, what is upside and what is downside of reality” (Landschip & Modderman, 2004). It is the act of touching the fixed, tangible environment that vouches for his sense of safety. Just like Landschip, Gunilla Gerland (1996), confused by an unexpected and carrying noise, looks for something to hold on to in the physical environment, so as not to lose her bearings. “The din made the ground under my feet disappear and I could neither see nor feel the world around me. Up and down were suddenly in the same place and I had no sense of where my feet were. [...] I had to feel something that stood still, something anchored, in a world that had suddenly become totally unpredictable.” The concrete perception of physical space—one more time—offers her an alternative way to make sense of what is happening.

#.5.2 An Own World of Experience

In different spheres, the conscious experience of the physical environment, described in the auto-biographies, shows a unique mode of perception and consciousness. The authors are aware of what *is*, what is directly perceptible. They substantiate the described experiences in relation to the built environment by an ‘other’ way of thinking, which makes them perceive, interpret and experience the world around them in an ‘other’ way. To explain his problems in dealing with the

built environment, van Dalen (1994) mentions that, according to him, the real causes have a perceptual nature. He discovered how he, as distinct from most other people, perceives the world in a structural way rather than a functional way, which involves another way of making sense of the environment. “Anyway, my perception functions in an unambiguously different way,” also Birger Sellin (1993) remarks. Landschip specifies his ‘other’ way of perceiving: “I do not think my senses are developed in a better or sharper way, I rather think that it is caused by what I’m doing with my sensory information” (Landschip & Modderman, 2004). Attempting to have complete cognitive control over the way he perceives the world around him and the way these perceptions are organized inside his head, he explicitly describes how he perceives the surrounding space by means of his body, and even how he consciously experiences his body. “Probably,” Landschip writes, “except for your senses, you have other means at your disposal to know who you are, and to define the boundaries between yourself and what is around you.” Nevertheless, Landschip, himself, uses the perception of the boundaries of his body as a reference. In this context, he describes his fear of remaining seated on a chair for too long. It ends up blurring the difference between the chair and his body. “At a certain moment, the interface of the chair is as warm as my body temperature, and at that moment I have lost the boundary between me and that chair” (Landschip & Modderman, 2004). To support his attempts to get a grip on the environment with his mind, Landschip is aware of the importance of a conscious perception of the world by using his body.

Gunilla Gerland (1996) extends the importance of bodily experience with her attempts to mentally follow up everything she is doing. When she plans to visit new places, it always requires a precise preparation. But however much she tries to harness the unknown environment, preparing everything with her mind, there is always an unpredictable aspect: “All that remains, what I can’t prepare for, is the town’s tempo, what the air feels like, what the town sounds like—everything that gives it a colour inside me.” Thanks to a continuous focus on cognitively grasping everything, she is aware of the fact that it is only possible to experience that *colour* of a city by being physically present.

The way the discussed authors consciously perceive the world and process information from the environment makes their view of the world unique. It does not only characterize their perception and interpretation of the built environment, but leaves its marks on their routine experience. “Autism is a way of being,” Jim Sinclair (1993) clarified. “It is pervasive; it colours every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence.” Autism, as a pervasive disorder, roughly shapes the world of experience.

#.6 In a Wider Perspective

A first analysis of the considered descriptions of the built environment by people with autism reveals a characteristic way of perceiving. Most authors of these autobiographies express how they experience their own perception of the world as different in comparison with other people. “I was only beginning to see how

peculiar my world was,” relates Liane H. Willey (1999), “not wrong or embarrassing or unessential, just peculiar and different.” Due to their different way of perceiving, the authors look at the world in a different way, they interpret the world based on this particular perspective and experience the world in a distinct way. Birger Sellin (1993) testifies: “In my world, I know my way well, but the reality is macabrely different.” To elaborate this ‘difference’ of worlds, Lourens Bijlsma (2000), convincingly describing his lack of overview of the environment, adds that an autistic person is not aware of it by himself: “it is the world as he got to know it.” The non-autistic environment clarifies for him that ‘reality’ contains more, that there are connections—assumed to be ‘real’ ones—that he is not able to perceive. It illustrates the power of society to disable: “Assuming that there is one way to be in a culture encourages the misunderstanding that those who are different from perceived norms are missing something, that it is their doing, that they are locked out for a reason, that they are in fact, in reality, disabled” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). Due to the way certain skills are made to count in various social settings, the different world of experience of people with autism could be considered as a deprivation.

However, the critique from a non-autistic world of experience could be reflected the other way around, turning the characteristics of autism into “something that everyone in the community could easily work with, and turn it into a strength” (McDermott & Varenne, 1995). “The AS community gives us much cause to celebrate,” states Liane H. Willey (1999). Jim Sinclair (1993) also explicitly transcends a sense of inferiority. Describing a child with autism as stranded in an alien world, he argues that this other world of people with autism invites our society, perhaps challenges our society, to look into their reality: “You’re going to have to give up the certainty that comes of being on your own familiar territory, of knowing you’re in charge, and let them teach you a little of [their] language, guide you a little way into [their] world.” It is an invitation that can be framed in the cultural disability model of Devlieger *et al.* (2003), suggesting that taking up a lens of disability, or i.c. an autistic point of view, enables us to ask questions about the dominant way of thinking of our society. Applying this stance to the analysis above—interpreting the built environment through the view of people with autism—an understanding of their descriptions can be a challenge to open our eyes towards a certain critique on the way we—so-called *neurotypicals*—think about the built environment. And what’s more, this unique point of view questions the way we assume our standards as normative in organising space in this society. Describing their world of experience, the authors uncover a direct and conscious way of experiencing the world, a plain view of the world that most of us are not aware of. In this way, the perspective of autism could prompt us to think about our own experience of space by throwing light on their particular experience, and challenges our way of thinking about the built environment.

But the cultural model of disability goes further, taking advantage of the difference between worlds of experience by admitting an exchange between those different worlds. In *Dubbelklik*³ (Landschip & Modderman, 2004), a correspondence between a person with autism and a person without, this exchange

³ Literally translated: ‘Double-click’

between the different worlds of both authors is clearly represented. In the end, the two of them testify that, thanks to this dialogue, they did not only get to know each other, but also got to know themselves. The descriptions of Loes Modderman about the non-autistic world taught Landschip a great deal about his autism. Conversely, Landschip's stories of his autism made Loes Modderman become acquainted with her non-autism. In this way, Modderman writes that, thanks to her contacts with Landschip, she—herself—realized more consciously the way she perceives and feels. Fascinated by the fact that 'realities' can be that different, she poses that this book is promising proof that "a bridge can be built between one world and the other, just like that, offering a valuable gift."

Looking for a bridge between two worlds of experience, this paper used the reading of anti-biographies as approach to discover the world of experience of people with autism. "Writing is my first step out of the other world," Birger Sellin (1993) explains. Studying their written stories with a focus on their interpretation of the built environment, this research maintained a particular approach to challenge the conception and design of space. However, starting from only a selection of anti-biographies, the scope of this research is limited. Insights can still be extended by analysing the work of some other major authors with autism (*e.g.* Temple Grandin). Moreover, considering only written stories of people with autism themselves—consciously putting into words their own actions and feelings—the understanding of their perspective is strictly limited to their own interpretation of experiences in interaction with the built environment. In the prospect of further research, the analysis of these well-considered written reflections will be supplemented with an investigation of the real interaction of people with autism with the built environment, focusing on their performance of actions in space, and their spoken reflections on it.

Despite the limitations of this research, the analysis of the built environment through the reflections of people with autism in their autobiographies, allowed us to raise a corner of the veil covering the autistic perspective on the built environment. Using this particular approach, this study unveiled how an 'other' mental disposition can broaden the designers' outlook on the built environment by accepting an exchange between both worlds of experience.

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