The Hidden Unwelcome: How Buildings Speak and Act

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Allow us to start with an anecdote.

A few years ago, Natalia needed to obtain a document from a town hall.¹ Eager to be first in line, and get a trivial bureaucratic practicality over with quickly, she rolled up her wheelchair to the main entrance 15 minutes before opening. Time went by, and numerous people queued behind her. When the main doors opened, she suddenly realised that, past the first door, there was a second revolving glass door. While the queue waited for her to react, she was in doubt whether her wheelchair would fit the small rounded passage. Once the first and second person walked past and entered the building using the revolving door, she noticed yet another door in the corner – a perfect fit for the wheelchair-sized her – but one that was locked. By now the third, fourth, and fifth person walked by. Through a glass panel, Natalia saw a security guard inside, next to the front desk. Surely, he must have the key to open the *other* entrance made for people like her, who did *not fit* the revolving door. However, the security guard was busy passing out advice to the ‘fit-people’ who were already inside, and did not notice the ‘un-fit’ other who remained outside. For a moment, she was consumed by the sight of dozens of people passing her. The idea of ‘getting in’ and ‘getting out’ quickly was dropped. Natalia was growing upset and decided to give the rotating door a chance. From the outside, it looked as if she was stubbornly planning to squeeze a square peg into a round hole. But maybe, if she pushed the wheelchair into the widest corner of the arched triangle... nope, wheelchair got stuck – right in the middle – and the rotating door stopped. Completely helpless and reliant on assistance, at least she got the guard’s attention. His, and that of all the angry people who were now stuck behind her and could not enter the building. After much back and forth and some muted (-behind glass panels-) comments within the

scope of curse, Natalia was finally freed from her crystal cell and could go on with her day. The handicapped-door remained locked until she asked for 'permission' to leave the building, hour and a half later.

Natalia has been a wheelchair-user for over 20 years, and although these situations have not been rare, only recently has she started to reflect on them. The questions arising from this experience did not occur naturally, but came to her much later. Why? Because she embodies the world as a wheelchair-user and the social ideologies of the culture where she lives. Nevertheless, several questions arose upon reflection: what – or who – causes these situations? What kind of bodies does architecture imply? How does (her) disability fit? What counts as a valued body; what counts as difference? In the following sections, we examine these questions through the lens of disability.

What Architecture Does

Buildings *speak*. They are neither empty, blank, nor neutral brick, stone, concrete, wood, or glass vessels, but highly coded artefacts of cultural mediation (Casey, 1996; de Botton, 2007; Johnson, 2007; Siebers, 2008). Architecture at its best has the capacity to move you, inspire awe, make experiences distinguishable and memorable, promote well-being, and/or enhance social connectedness (Parkinson et al., 2018). Pallasmaa, for instance, illustrates how the touch of – nothing more than – a door handle may arouse feelings of connectedness with body, place, and time:

It is pleasurable to press a door handle shining from thousands of hands to have entered the door before you: the clean shimmer of ageless wear has turned into an image of welcome and hospitality. The door handle is the handshake of a building. The tactile sense connects us with time and tradition (Pallasmaa, 2005, p. 56).

The automated glass doors of today make the entry physically convenient, but strip the act of any existential meaning... A proper door simultaneously protects and invites, it mediates gestures of secrecy and welcome, courtesy and dignity (Pallasmaa, 2000, p. 9).

While there is no reason to doubt Pallasmaa's marvellous encounter with a door handle, it should be acknowledged that these poetic encounters can be experienced quite differently by different people. What is the encounter with a door handle by a person with

busy or no hands? ‘Welcome’, ‘hospitality’, and ‘dignity’ may not be expressions they are likely to use.

The dramaturgy of Pallasmaa’s experience of a door (handle) contrasts with Norman’s (quoted in Posner, 2016) idea of what an encounter ought to be: ‘an ideal door is one that, as I walk up to it, and walk through it, I’m not aware that I had opened the door and shut it’. An easy entrance does not need to be devoid of poetic and/or experiential content, however. For instance, Jellema et al. (2018, p. 219) note that a cancer patient emphasised ‘the transition between the typical hospital environment and “her world” on the other side of the door where she received chemotherapy. It is as though the door says “welcome” by automatically opening, outwards, to her.’

Architecture can also generate triggers or ‘nudges’ towards certain responses, and (be designed to) direct and motivate behaviour: it can enable or disable interactions *by design* (Bille et al., 2015; Parkinson et al., 2018). A jail inspiring fear, stone lions symbolically guarding entrances, or a corporate building suggesting wealth, power, and dominance are not necessarily pre-subjective, pre-social characteristics of buildings, but attributions made by society projected onto them. Anthropologists argue that the way people think and behave (and design) is perceived as natural, when in fact, it embodies self-imposed cultural rules and roles (Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987).

Architecture may also explicitly direct behaviours for strategic reasons or exercise power by restricting and/or controlling people. Ittelson et al. (1974) describe, and Natalia’s encounter with the town hall’s door corroborates, that designers’ arrangement of partitions, rooms, doors, windows, and hallways encourages or hinders communication and, to this extent, affects social interaction. A door was reason to turn what should have been a neutral or pleasant encounter between Natalia and people in the public scene, to a disheartening one. Beyond symbolisms, buildings may act as political instruments of physical separation and dislocation; a (sometimes quite tangible) discriminating filter separating ‘substances’ from ‘impurities’. Historically, built environments were often used as a tool to secure social order by putting social deviance out of sight: ‘that which is different must be located outside the boundaries of the proper, in foreigners, in animals, in the congenitally disabled, and in women’ (Shildrick, 2001, p. 5). Buildings – and built environments –, therefore, *act*.

Design a World Fit for People or One for Fit People?

If collective social values and ideals are imprinted in buildings, what kind of bodies are used, and therefore valued, during their creation? Which are the bodies that matter? In attempting to answer this question, we turn to Imrie's (2000, 2003) work on the bodies architects have in mind when designing. His findings reveal that architects tend to (1) design according to fixed technical standards or geometrical proportions of the body; (2) abstract the body as either 'normal' or neutral (i.e., either male or without gender, either White or without race, either adult or age-less, either able-bodied and healthy or without physical differences); or (3) mirror a self-referential image of their own bodies.

The reductive (Western) conceptions of normalcy – assimilated in architecture as baselines – reflect profound ideas and ideals about a specific social body (Goodley, 2011; Imrie, 2003; Waldschmidt et al., 2017). That a normative social body is embedded in architecture becomes especially evident in its encounter with bodies falling outside these social norms – or when an obstinate wheelchair-user wishes to squeeze into a rotating door. When moving into space, a disabled (or any non-normative) body discloses the social body implied by it: 'there is a one-to-one correspondence between the dimensions of built environments and their preferred social body – the body invited inside as opposed to those bodies not issued an invitation' (Siebers, 2008, p. 85). Likewise, Tingley (2020, para. 34) stresses: 'when we don't notice the built environment, it's silently affirming our right to be there, our value to society. When we do, too often it is because it's telling us we don't belong'.

When one looks at how some architects understand 'disability' and how their practices and outcomes deal with difference, most show a single-track association with wheelchair-use accessibility regulations (e.g., see Gray et al., 2003; Rieger & Strickfaden, 2016; Tauke & Smith, 2020). Some architects struggle to reconcile the body in its multiple forms despite an extensive array of possibilities in architecture, advances in technology, and the richness of the currently available material palette. The architecture-disability intersect is still contained within only a few options, with ramps and elevators dominating the discourse (Guffey, 2018; Hall & Imrie, 1999; Liebermann, 2019). It has been focused towards solving functional matters. Applying measurements in bi-dimensional space is the prevailing criterion (e.g., drawing circles representing turning radiuses for wheelchairs). A clear indication that space is reduced to the rule of measure is the priority given to various architecture handbooks that set the dimensions of space in

relation to various activities, from *Architects' Data* to the *Metric Handbook* (Imrie, 2003; Till, 2009). Users, their bodies, and their phenomenological existence are diminished to generalised and stereotyped abstractions (Drake, 1984; Hall & Imrie, 1999; Imrie, 1998). Depicting (disabled) people in this narrow way reduces them to dimensions and functional schemes of space (Verhulst et al., 2016); 'people are drawn with lines around them, as police chalk round cadavers', Till (2009, p. 120) writes. 'Drained of their phenomenal or social presences, these bodies assume the equivalent status of the furniture, objects there solely for their ability to be moved around and to behave in measured and universal ways'.

In 'Other' Words, Disabled

Disability may seem like a natural fact; simple to understand, obvious, uncomplicated. But just like buildings, disability, too, is a construction carrying social meaning (Goodley, 2011; Reid-Cunningham, 2009; Waldenfels, 2011). In the 1970s, the social model of disability was introduced emphasizing that disability, unlike impairment, is, indeed, socially constructed. 'It is not disability per se which disables, but societal practices of "disablement" which result in disability' (Waldschmidt et al., 2017, p. 21). The cultural model of disability (Devlieger, 2005; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006; Waldschmidt et al., 2017), while not negating the social and material influence on the impaired body, provided a more complete concept; considering how disability is defined, lived, and materialised informs how societal structures (including architecture) deal with bodily difference. What counts as bodily difference, however, is not straightforward.

Murphy (1987) identified disabled people as 'the other'. Othering implies marking, and further devaluating, perceived differences to enact a divide between 'us' (belonging) and 'them' (not-belonging). Central to the construction of otherness is an asymmetry of power relationships: 'only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity and to devalue the particularity of others while imposing discriminatory measures' (Staszak, 2009, p. 44).

Disconnection, detachment, and keeping the other at a (physical and/or symbolic) distance are equally central to the dynamic of othering. (Western) society identifies difference – and otherness – within gender, age, class, race, education, employment, health, and bodily appearance, but problematises only *some* of their features. That human beings are unable to see ultra-violet light, for instance, is considered neither a 'lack' or a

difference worth anyone's concern, Ihde (1976, pp. 43–44) argues: 'were you suddenly be plunged into a society of bees and there have to make our ways, we should begin to appreciate quite dramatically this "lack" that lies beyond the threshold of our visual experience'. What constitutes a 'lack' is socially constructed; impairment (and by extension disability) is a label society imposed upon a set of cognitive and/or functional differences; arbitrary bodily values determined as legitimate. Some differences fall into the impairment/disability category and are valued negatively (e.g., being unable to see), while other differences either do not count (e.g., being unable to see infra-red light) or are considered positive differences, skills, talents, or exoticisms (e.g., wearing fashionable glasses). Rather than a natural fact, disability may thus be considered a naturalised difference (Waldschmidt et al., 2017).

Furthermore, (built) environments are full of technologies that make life easier (e.g., coffee machines, lawn mowers, elevators, or subways) (Siebers, 2008). These are now considered as natural extensions of our bodies and would, by no means, label the people using them as 'disabled'. A cane, wheelchair, or hearing aid, however – although often considered powerful enablers by those using/wearing them – are fierce symbols of deficit, lack, and loss. For many people, disability is 'written on their bodies' and will therefore often be deemed as a dominant feature displacing other features of their personhood.

While otherness is produced by humans, it is materialised by architecture practices and outcomes. Disabled people being (or counting as) different is reinforced by the stigmatizing spaces and objects assigned to them (e.g., a 'special' entrance through a secondary door (see Figure 1)), which only confirms their otherness. Social forces – attitudes and representational practices (including architecture) – may exert greater influence on the disabled person than their impairments (Siebers, 2008; Swain et al., 2013).

Figure 1. Accessible entry © Lynn Swedberg

Historically, infrastructural components sustained geographical separation and exclusion of those considered not-belonging (Dischinger, 2000; Finnerty, 2016). The history of social location and displacement of different and foreign people was observed in ancient Greece, with its idealization of body shapes and extermination of deformed ones (Žuraw, 2016). Many centuries later, one may assume this is largely a thing of the distant past, and yet, a wheelchair-user encounters a door filtering out people not conforming with certain bodily shapes. Built environments still are spatial markers in signifying a difference between those within and belonging – literally and figuratively – and those outside and not-belonging (Herwig, 2008; Imrie & Kumar, 1998; Schull, 1984). Even when physical barriers are removed (strictly speaking, the town hall *was* accessible after all), entering through a different door, having to spend extra-time waiting for someone to notice, and/or asking for permission to enter and leave a public building contributes to a ‘notorious special needs style’ (Inkl. Design, 2016).

Buildings’ less-than-ideal solutions only reinforce the stigmatisation of disability. The encounter with the door – not Natalia’s impairment – signalled that she was disadvantaged. Up until her interaction with the revolving door, her impairment was not present to her and possibly not particularly salient to anyone else waiting in line – there was no reason for it to be. The encounter with the revolving door, however, made the pendulum swing to the opposite direction; suddenly, her mis-fit was not just utterly present to her, but became the very reason for people’s animosity. By blocking the door, Natalia disabled others, and surely enough, they became angry at this disruption. Everyone there seemed to blame her for the situation *she* had caused. Why not blame the door or the architect who designed it? Why did *she* not think of blaming the door, or the designer, at that moment, but instead accepted her fair share of guilt? Her sense of self, Natalia realises, is deeply influenced by the responses of those she encounters.

The town hall door exposed an attribute that disqualified Natalia in relation to the others belonging to the category of ‘fit’. Rather than a welcoming, hospitable encounter, her experience with the door was a confrontation: with the door itself, with the building, with the institution that represents a town hall, with people around her, and even with herself. Society seems to have normalised inaccessible entrances (e.g., for wheelchair-users); but imagine a public building with doors negating access to a Black person – would that be considered admissible nowadays? Buildings *speak*; and buildings *act*.

Design ‘for the disabled’ is often camouflaged positively as ‘priority’ or ‘special treatment’. For instance: ‘special’ bus entrances, ‘special’ toilets, or ‘special’ drinking fountains. Pre-civil rights drinking fountains segregated people by race and class. Although framed differently, the concept of segregation is still latent in current times and can be seen through numerous designs, including drinking fountains (see Figure 2, 3). Many designers do not realise the deep implications of design’s message, readily available to society to read, enact, and further internalise. It is not always necessary to express whom a drinking fountain (ramp, entrance, ...) is for. Instead, affordances implied by designs can often be interpreted directly by the person encountering the object or space, without the need of redundant signage (Gibson, 1979; Norman, 2013). For instance, low fountains afford drinking by short – or seated – people, while higher fountains afford drinking by taller people. Would Natalia attempt to drink from a higher-up fountain although there is a more comfortable option (i.e., a lower fountain) readily available? Is it necessary to stick an international wheelchair symbol to the apparatus to let her – or everyone else – know which one might be the more convenient option to drink from?

Figure 2. Segregation by difference in drinking fountains © Kickstand
Figure 3. ‘Special’ drinking fountain © Sabine Pérez Liebergesell

Encounters with e.g., stigmatising fountains or inaccessible revolving doors affect not only disabled people’s interactions with built environments, and their relationships to others, but especially with how they view themselves (Butler & Bowlby, 1997). Projected ableist attitudes are so pervasive that many disabled people internalise, and further replicate them (Overboe, 1999). As long as designed places do not anticipate disabled people’s (non-normative) bodies, their notion of self may be deeply affected by a lack of places they can identify with – or quite literally ‘fit’ in. With time, and repeated reminders

of how ‘special’ they are, disabled people may internalize their (perceived) otherness and thus incorporate the superiority of the norm. The hidden meaning of something as simple and mundane as a door or a drinking fountain, how these human-made objects *speak* and *act*, is often overlooked in design education and practice. Time to change that.

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Notes

¹ The town hall we refer to was completed in 2008, and thus presumably conceived according to contemporary ideas and ideals.