

Disabled Artists Making Dis/Ordinary Spaces

EVALUATION REPORT

The Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project/Jos Boys/FINAL/AUGUST 17

Mission: 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.

What we did

Disabled Artists making Dis/Ordinary Spaces ran from January to June 2017, with the aim of developing creative new ways of artists and educators working together towards making the built environment more inclusive. It centred on the co-creation of prototype activities in three different UK architecture and interior design schools. These activities were also captured, promoted and discussed at wider events. We evaluated the project by asked participating artists and educators to write reflective diaries about their activities; by involving a wider invited group in discursive workshops at the beginning and the end of the project; and through gathering feedback at an open event about the activities.

The three prototype collaborations all had very positive feedback from the co-creators, from the students involved and from a wider audience. Short videos of each (together with an overall introduction video) can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/album/4562223>. At Westminster University, disabled artist Liz Crow ran a one-day workshop with educator Julia Dwyer called *Tilted Horizons*. For the educator working in this way meant that “the workshop was grounded in a sensitive understanding of the experience of seeing space differently by necessity rather than choice, whilst also recognising the potentials for a more creative approach to spatial design that this way of seeing might lead students towards.” The Head of School called it “one of the first projects [about dis/ability] that is really interesting” and has committed to further involvement. At the CASS, hearing-impaired artist Joseph Young worked with Foundation Director Chi Roberts on a co-designed five-week option project entitled *SoundMarks*. For Joseph, “planning and preparation was excellent throughout, with Chi proving to be a willing and receptive collaborative partner, working with me to understand a field that was new to her and to integrate that into an already established learning framework, which was a new experience for me.” There are already plans to repeat/extend this activity in Foundation next academic year, and to promote and develop it through the University’s ‘diversity in the curriculum’ agenda. At the Manchester School of Architecture, visually impaired artist Zoe Partington worked ‘into’ an established design project for MArch (post-graduate architecture) students called the *Ideal Age Friendly Home*. For tutor Stefan White “the experiential side of the workshop and the role of the disabled person is crucial for engaging the students.” The DAMD/OS activity at Manchester will be presented at an annual architectural educators

conference ('Architecture Connects') at Oxford Brookes University in September 2017.

Overall, then, the project achieved its aims; offering strong evidence that working with disabled artists to develop creative new ways of engaging with architecture and interiors is both relevant and powerful; and also has considerable potential for expanding and developing activities.

What we learnt

The aim of evaluation has been to inform next steps; to explore how to increase the capacity of, and opportunities for, established and emerging disabled artists to work in various roles across built environment related education and practice; and to assess effective ways of being innovative influencers on the design of built space.

Key lessons learnt were that:

1. Working this way creates considerable enthusiasm and energy amongst artists, educators, students and other built environment professionals. There was a shared sense of innovative possibilities and of the potential to produce resonant impacts. This was evidenced both by the productive and enjoyable nature of the activities themselves, and by the ease with which future collaborations (and ideas for additional activities) are being generated by our support network.
2. There was a shared recognition of the value of starting from difference through working with disabled artists, centrally by beginning from immersive and embodied experiences. This is crucial to learning architectural and interior design (but does not often happen). In addition, the artists demonstrated how disability and impairment can offer creative design opportunities, rather than be a 'boring' problem to be solved. The fact that having a visual impairment made you 'see better' (Zoe Partington), or having a hearing impairment make you pay much more attention to sound and how it works (Joseph Young) can be a powerful way of shifting tutor and student assumptions about disabled people.
3. Educational projects need to do more than just raise students' sensory awareness (that is, increase their notice of all their senses in space). Rather, a core theme is to enable them to reflect on both their own 'being in the world' and that of others. For Liz Crow for example, the project was about:

realising the extent to which addressing my own need to lie down was not only about finding a personal access solution but, in and of itself, was a subversion of architecture. (...) I demonstrated the extent to which architecture has designed out bodies such as mine. (...) In doing so, my personal needs extended into a site of activism and creativity.
4. We need to explore ways of enabling students to translate their developing awareness and understanding of disability into actual designs. How can difference be represented, mapped and responded to through design ideas and spaces? How can we better integrate functional access with creative and aesthetically beautiful interventions through co-designed activities?

5. It is important that professionals, educators and students understand they are working with artists. Artists are not there to 'represent' a category of impairment, but to share and build on their own creative arts practice. We need to make sure we are maintaining the art within the project.
6. This project needs to explore how to not lose the experience of disability, but to also connect with questions of difference and diversity more widely, as well as associated concerns like sustainability and healthy cities. However, it must not avoid disability discrimination and inequality or the real effects of inadequate access to, and inclusion in, the built environment.
7. Much of our wider audience feedback wanted to see immediate impact on students' work produced from the co-created activities. They wanted the work to directly evidence some change in attitude and/or design quality. We need to be clearer on what counts as impact and how we measure it.
8. Using terms like disability, access and inclusion within built environment education and practice tends to reproduce already held assumptions that the activity will be 'politically correct' and non-creative. There is a need to shift away from common sense discourses within architecture and the built environment that treat disability as a technical problem to be 'solved' by retro-fitting at the end of a 'normal' design process. Doing this requires re-inventing both discourse and ways of operating.
9. The project needs to find ways to translate its mission into a set of principles that can express its creative difference to 'normal' ways of doing disability and access with architecture and built environment education and practice. These principles can then creatively underpin next stage development of resources, training, projects and networks.
10. The sheer fact of an artist having a disability is not enough for taking on the kinds of engagements being explored here. We need to find ways of building on the expertise already developed to train and mentor other established and emerging disabled artists interested in the built environment that is underpinned by our mission and principles. Artists need to understand architectural languages and parameters, about how architects and educators think, and to consider differences between art and design education.
11. Infiltrating a new and innovative engagement with disability in architectural and built environment education practice through the creativity of disabled artists also depends on working from where different students, educators, universities and practitioners 'come from'. This will require a range of engagement strategies, potentially including collaborating on research activities.
12. 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. The project needs to explore and exploit all these possibilities.

13. There were some anxieties about non-disabled educators and practitioners 'taking over' or not adequately understanding the project's mission and principles. We need to think about what kinds of protocols and training opportunities are needed here.

14. The Dis/Ordinary Architecture model is a creative way of working in design education around spatial design and disability, but does not and should not take on all teaching around space and disability. However, there is little other teaching to contrast with or indeed support this initiative, and as a result there might be an expectation (from students/course leaders) that the task of holistically addressing disability and space is assigned to this initiative only: which is seen as 'dealing with' disability once and for all for that course, just as a one-off.

15. The project needs to move towards embedding activities across whole courses and departments, so that these do not remain in the special yet marginal category; with architecture and related courses taking responsibility and ownership by, for example, directly funding disabled artists and tutors, artists in residence etc.

16. Building a set of teaching resources/references/good practice and available artists would be very useful to both frame and promote activities. We also need to think of how we can productively and effectively disseminate these to educators and others, as well as being used, embedded, and assessing impact.

17. Longer term the aim must be to embed difference and dis/ability as a new 'normal' in architecture, interiors and built environment education and practice. This is not about disabled people being 'allowed' into the existing club, but about creating a different kind of club.

18. Although it was valuable to make use of free venues, these spaces were often not conducive in terms of access and inclusion for many of the artists. We need to consider how we relate to the spaces in which we are operating.

Making an impact

The activity and its associated events has enabled the drawing in of more disabled artists interested in working creatively around built environment issues. Through a Disability Arts Online (DAO) call, four established and emerging artists new to the Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project participated in one or both of the open events, all of whom has indicated an interest in continuing to be involved.

It is also clear that the enthusiasm and energy generated by the project, is already having a 'snowballing' impact across architecture, interiors and built environment education and practice in the UK. The introductory invited workshop immediately generated two more collaborations, one of which has already taken place. Disabled artist Damian Toal worked with tutors from both the Bartlett and the Architectural Association (AA) – two of the most prestigious architecture schools in the UK and

internationally – on a one-day mapping workshop. The AA also hosted an evening event, called ‘The New Standard’ where Deaf artist Aaron Williamson was one of the invited speakers <http://www.aaschool.ac.uk/VIDEO/lecture.php?ID=3675>

The other collaboration, between disabled artist Noemi Lakmaier and Katie Lloyd-Thomas, an educator in architectural theory at Newcastle University, will take place in the next academic year. It should also be noted that the first year leader for BA (Hons) Interior Architecture at the University of Brighton wants to work with a disabled artist in her course - having been involved herself as a student some years ago in one of the original Architecture Inside Out (AIO) activities, from which the Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project has developed.

In addition, commitments have been made for expanding Dis/Ordinary Architecture activities:

1. At the Bartlett School of Architecture where an internal research grant of £2890 (in collaboration with Professor Barbara Penner) has been won for a public event in January 2018 called “Doing Disability Differently in Architectural Education” that will fund 5 disabled artists to run short workshops.
2. From Professor Harry Charrington, Head of School of Architecture and the Built Environment, University of Westminster to co-fund a coordinated series of events involving disabled artists across the whole school during 2018.
3. From Chi Roberts, Director of Foundation, CASS, London Metropolitan University, with the aim of embedding disabled artists as tutors longer term, as a crucial element of the University’s Curriculum for Diversity agenda.
4. From tutors at the Universities of Manchester and Brighton, who are both committed to working with disabled artists in first year undergraduate for the academic year 2017-18.

This first stage prototyping project has also provided the group with ‘proof of concept’ that has enabled the achievement of an award from the RSA Catalyst Fund of £1960. This is to facilitate a one and half day workshop for its co-founders to explore how best to develop the Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project as a long-term and sustainable platform, so as to embed and increase effectiveness and impact.

Next steps

The Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project is currently making a next stage bid to the Arts Council, for developing its work. This is planned to run January to December 2018, so that activities can take place in second semester 16-17, or first semester 17-18 (or both). This will be to:

1. try out additional co-partnered prototyping activities
2. expand on/embed previous activities
- 3 engage and build capacity of more disabled artists
4. design, develop and test resources/training for artists, educators and students

5. promote and discuss through events and other communication channels

In addition, the Dis/Ordinary Architecture Project has achieved a RSA Catalyst Award, to develop short, medium and long-term goals around:

- audiences, identity and impact
- artist-designer collaborative activities, methodologies and protocols
- training, resources and other service support needs
- organisational and governance frameworks
- income streams, funding and sponsorship
- ongoing activities and strategies

Developing a master working document around these issues will enable us to grow an innovative sustainable and effective organisation, that can really begin to make an impact on the design of access and inclusion in the future.

With many thanks to all the participants, and especially to Liz Crow for her additional evaluation work: and to the Arts Council for supporting our work.

