

Body Trouble: Architectural narratives of ability and disability

Abstract

Matters of the body are rarely made explicit in either architectural scholarship or practice. My research examines the architectural attitudes towards the human body that professional and academic responses to mandated disabled access have revealed. The passage of section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and more widely in 1990 with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ushered in new encounters between the "disabled body"¹—primarily in the form of the wheelchair user—and architecture, challenging conventional spatial practices and design in a number of ways. Yet, architectural theory is almost silent on the issue, while reluctant describes much mainstream professional feeling. This is particularly interesting given that today, many aspects of the body, such as its health, control, and representation, have moved to center stage of academic and popular interest. The issue of disabled access offers a way to understand these latent "body ideologies"² in architecture by illustrating the interplay between space and a specific and visible type of body. Lastly, and most important for my project, accommodating disabled bodies questions the role that architecture plays in constituting the category of disability.

Over the last fifteen years of practicing and teaching I have come to realize that, because practitioners engage with disability largely through externally imposed regulations, it is not perceived as relevant to the creative dimension of design. To transform professional attitudes, I believe, requires cultivating ways to theorize the questions that disabled access/disabled bodies pose for architecture in the academic arena. Although a number of projects variously address disability and architecture, few, to my knowledge, also analyze the underlying beliefs and their history in architecture. Recognizing the paucity of analytical tools within the field, my approach uses methods from other disciplines to study disability and space, thus contributing to a broader theoretical and formal reengagement between architecture and the body. I propose this research as a small step towards the long-term goal of changing professional practice by introducing new theories about the body during formal architectural education

I am requesting support to conduct research at two architectural sites to produce case study reports that will comprise key parts of my dissertation. I have completed the first phase of historical and theoretical research in three disciplines—disability studies, science and technology studies (STS), and architecture history and theory—the first two of which introduce innovative concepts and methods for analyzing the relationship between architecture, technology, and bodies. Last spring I passed my general exams for the literature review of these fields.

One architectural site is Het Dorp ("The Village" in Dutch), a planned community for disabled residents in The Netherlands designed by the renowned modernist architect Jacob Bakema in the 1960's. Remarkably, there has been no literature published about this unique place since the mid 1970's. The other is a proposed ramp in the Board of Supervisors Chambers in San Francisco City Hall, which, to date, is too controversial to be built. Between them they illustrate some key issues that surround the architectural accommodation of disabled people: aesthetics, universality, exceptionalism, and the responsibilities of society. I have already made arrangements with Siza Dorp Groep, the operating healthcare company, for a research visit to Het Dorp in the spring of 2010.

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¹ Of course, there is no single or unified notion of the disabled body, nor of "the body", for that matter; I am using it as a short hand concept.

² McRuer, Robert. 2006. *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*. New York: New York University Press: 88. I am paraphrasing his "able-bodied ideologies".