

# making discursive spaces

A collaboration between deaf and disabled artists and interior architecture students



Interior Architecture and Design

**University of Brighton**

# making discursive spaces

## Who is this site for?

This site is aimed mainly at architects and related practitioners, architecture and interiors students, and their teachers; with the intention of informing, challenging and maybe even changing some of the ways disability is thought about.

I, a non-disabled person, am the main narrator for this site. I want to take this opportunity to talk mainly to other non-disabled people, particularly within architectural education; because we also have to take some responsibility for helping to remove the attitudinal and physical barriers placed in front of deaf and disabled people.

Jos Boys

## How is this site organised?

**Making Discursive Spaces** is more about asking questions than providing solutions. It therefore incorporates different voices through quotations throughout, allowing some contradictory statements and differences to show.

This website was written as an evaluation of the project. You will soon be able to download it as a PDF.

## Introduction

This website explores some new ways of thinking about, and responding to, architecture and accessibility. It tries to capture some interesting 'discursive spaces' around disability and building design, based on a creative collaboration between deaf and disabled artists and interior architecture students from the School of Architecture and Design, University of Brighton during May 2007.

It really put a rocket up my ar\*e and I think that was important – it got me going. It should really extend to everyone, everyone should have this opportunity.

Student feedback 11th May 2007

## What is this site about?

**Making Discursive Spaces** wants to know why the diverse experiences of deaf and disabled people remain so invisible in architectural education and practice. We ask why accessibility is still seen as simultaneously worthy and boring? And we want to know why the principle of universal access is still treated as merely an add-on to 'normal' architecture, rather than a valuable and exciting creative challenge.

Discursive - "lengthy and including extra material that is not essential to what is being written or spoken about."

Dictionary definition

Working with deaf and disabled artists has opened up new ways - new discursive spaces - to imagine accessibility.

Here, we want to show that disability is a powerfully disruptive means of re-thinking not only how to design more accessible spaces but also aspects of architectural education itself.

**Contact us**

If you want more information about the project or have any comments about the site.

I felt my space, because disabled artists have helped me put me in my space...

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

# making discursive spaces

## A note on terminology

Many Deaf people, particularly those who use BSL (British Sign Language) argue that they are a linguistic minority with their own language and culture; and therefore do not define themselves as disabled. This is why, throughout this website, the term used is deaf and disabled artists.

## Medical and social models of disability

Most deaf and disabled people differentiate between a medical and social model of disability. The medical model focuses on the individual and their impairment; perceived as a problem that can be improved through medical intervention. The social model of disability argues instead that the problem is not with individuals but that it is the barriers, prejudice and exclusion by society (purposely or inadvertently) which are the ultimate factors in defining who is disabled and who is not in a particular society.

## What are Discursive Spaces?

### **Making Discursive Spaces**

hopes to open up disability and architectural design beyond the limitations of the current language of accessibility, with its emphasis on technical solutions of platform lifts and ramps; and beyond the conventional assumptions that frame disability in ways that people with disabilities themselves do not recognise.

To do this requires finding out about the many voices and experiences of deaf and disabled people - to enable differences as well as similarities to be heard - and not to close things down as 'design solutions' for the disabled. This means accepting difference and complexity. It means telling many - potentially conflicting - stories. And it means admitting to what isn't working well as well as what is.



**Deaf artists Miles Thomas and Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq talk with students over lunch at Brick Lane.**

# making discursive spaces

## The limits of current approaches

Conventional forms of user consultation with deaf and disabled people on building and public space design – such as via access groups – offer a quite limited model for collaborations between disabled people and designers. This is because deaf and disabled people are often simplistically defined as building users expected to 'speak for' – and only about – their disability. What is more, this model is based on deaf and disabled people only being asked to react to existing case-by-case examples, usually as an 'afterthought'; rather than by being involved in the whole design process or in design philosophies and approaches more generally.



**Metamorphosis: a work undertaken on site by Rachel Gadsden, by photographing the space through crushed, semi-transparent plastic.**

## The problem for designers and design students

At the same time, existing assumptions about designers – that they only design 'for themselves' – blur the complexity of the design process. This requires designers to develop understandings of, and learn empathy with, a very wide range of different users for each specific building project (without ever being able to know the needs and preferences of all 'real' users). Yet, they are usually offered 'disability' as a homogeneous category whose 'problems' can be met merely with pre-given technical solutions. These are focussed on accessibility (platform lifts, ramps, etc.) and prevent rather than enhance involvement with, or understanding of, the desires and concerns of people with a wide range of life experiences as well as disabilities.

## Bringing people together differently

Bringing together deaf and disabled artists with interior architecture students in a collaborative space both enables richer descriptions of material space and disability than traditionally discussed and opens up interpretations of the built environment from different 'positions' to creative and constructive review. We hoped this would produce more creative complexity, and therefore deeper levels of understanding so as to enrich design quality, not just for deaf and disabled people but for everyone.

# making discursive spaces

## Architecture Inside Out

This project is now linked to the Architecture-InsideOut project, set up by deaf and disabled artists in the SE region to develop creative engagements with architecture.

[Visit Architecture-InsideOut](#)

## Artist participants in Discursive Spaces

Many thanks to the artists who participated in **Making Discursive Spaces**:

Caroline Cardus, Noemi Lakmeier, Rachel Gadsden, Zoe Partington-Sollinger, Sarah Pickthall, Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq, Miles Thomas and Damian Toal.

## Why deaf and disabled artists?

As disabled artists and users, we are forced to constantly evaluate form and function and engage creatively with practical problems around negotiating space. This emotional and physical engagement with space allows for a much broader debate around how we as people relate to architecture and space.

[Artist's blog entry April 8 2007 10.47am](#)

While the work of the artists does address considerations of inclusive design, what it also challenges and encourages is a philosophical and creative engagement with multifunctional and often transgressive use of space.

[Artist's blog entry April 8 2007 10.47am](#)

## Listening to deaf and disabled people

It was very important for the students to listen to deaf and disabled people narratives of their own experiences, rather than make assumptions about what they experience or want from building design. The artists' group was diverse; in some cases deafness or disability was central to their creative production, in others it informed the work but did not generate it, in others it was considered an insignificant factor.

I just really felt them as artists first: that they were consumed with their art and professionalism rather than their disability. Disability was just a part of it.

[Student feedback 11th May 2007](#)

It (was) important to know and see and experience disabled artists as people with families, partners, connections and lives not only defined by their disability.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

## Undermining stereotypical assumptions

The presence of such a range of artists immediately undermined the stereotypes which separate out disabled and non-disabled people as easily definable and non-overlapping categories; and which can only see different deaf and disabled people as their disability.

That they, well disabled people, are often on the outside and have barriers put up – they are not the problem.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

Everyone has got their problems or issues, not just disabled people.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

I think disabled people are still quite outcast really certainly in the design field, they are on the periphery and are controlled by stereotypes of themselves...

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**



# making discursive spaces

## Student participants

With many thanks to the students who participated: Kerry Alford, Charlotte Brisley, Matt Everest, Laia Martin Marqueda, Lettie McCall, Alex Paduano, Rohini Pophale, Dominie Shelley, Vasiliki Stylianou, Ellie Taplin, and Rebecca Whythe.

## What We Did

### **Making Discursive Spaces**

was centred around a conventional studio-based design project in Interior Architecture at the University of Brighton, in Spring 2007. Second year undergraduate students were asked to propose a programme for artists' studios (defined as widely as they wanted) which fitted in and around the current activities of Truman Brewery in Brick Lane, East London.



**Each of the artists took it in turns to show examples of their work to students through a slideshow**

The artists joined us towards the end of this project, and interacted through seminars, presentations and 1:1 tutorials. This section outlines what our aims were for **Making Discursive Spaces** and the processes we went through.

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## Questions we wanted to ask

Discursive - "lengthy and including extra material that is not essential to what is being written or spoken about."

Dictionary definition

Because we wanted to generate 'Discursive Spaces', one of the central aims of this project was to capture, communicate and reflect on artists, students and tutors experiences, both to each other and more widely.

### Taking a discursive position

Discursive Spaces takes this idea of the 'extra' and the supplementary, as an important theme. Deaf and disabled people are themselves often framed as non-essential, prevented from the space or time for lengthy dialogues with non-disabled 'experts' or interrogations of 'normal' space. **Making Discursive Spaces** is about refusing to de-value the 'extra', but rather making it central.

### Some Questions

**Making Discursive Spaces** wanted to ask many questions, at different levels from practicalities to theories and across artistic and design practices; and between education and practice. So, we wanted to know what such a brief collaboration between students and artists might enable.

### For students....

- How could we provide creative and relevant disability awareness support?
- How would working with deaf and disabled artists affect the quality of student design project work?
- What could the project offer in terms of enhanced learning experiences?

## For tutors...

- How could we introduce tutors to disability awareness issues?
- How would they engage with a disability and architecture project?
- How might it affect how they thought about their own teaching?
- How could working with deaf and disabled artists offer a critique of architectural education processes more generally?

## For artists...

- What would be productive and creative ways of engaging with students?
- How could the project inform artists understanding and critique of architectural education?
- How might it affect their own artistic practices around the built environment?
- What might be ways of continuing and extending 'Discursive Spaces' around disability and architectural design?

## For the project...

- How could we develop examples of good practice in the teaching and learning of architecture and interiors?
- How might the project feed into a wider critique of assumptions in architectural education?
- Could we start to imagine innovative new ways of bringing disability issues into design education?
- What would be techniques for building robust ways for bringing deaf and disabled artists (and other 'outsiders') into design education?

These questions had varying degrees of relevance and interest to the different participants in **Making Discursive Spaces**. There were also, essentially, my questions, linked to my instigation of the project. Finally, we were still doing a design studio project which had to be assessed within conventional educational criteria.

# making discursive spaces

## The Design Project

There is more about the design project, with project briefs, other information, and samples of student work-in-progress on the project blog. [Visit the Discursive Spaces blog](#)

## More on the design project

The **Making Discursive Spaces** project brought together seven deaf and disabled artists with a group of ten second year undergraduate interior architecture students at the University of Brighton, UK, on a design project for artists' studios in a dilapidated London warehouse.



**A view across the open expanse of the top floor of the warehouse in Brick Lane, site for the project**

## Working with Inside Out artists

This project with interior architecture students was developed from a previous Arts Council SE funded project called Inside Out. In the first phase of the Inside Out project deaf and disabled artists undertook creative work in response to their experiences of the built environment. This initial work was captured on a website, with the intention of informing and involving architectural practitioners and students in debates about disability and building design.

## The collaborative process

**Making Discursive Spaces** aimed to develop one such creative and constructive engagement. Deaf and disabled people were therefore not located conventionally as clients or users but as tutors, that is, creative, professional and artistic individuals with important insights to offer, integral to the building design process. They were there as collaborators and mentors, beginning speculative discussions about how the experiences of disabled people might be articulated more resonantly within architectural and interior design education.

I really didn't and don't want to be an

accessibility facilitator and so didn't go in this way.

**Artist's feedback 11th May 2007**

It felt important to give support on whatever level people were processing really.

**Artist's feedback 11th May 2007**

...we were not about influencing really accessible yet boring spaces but were artists...

**Artist's feedback 11th May 2007**

This was not about the artists telling students 'what disabled people want', but about working with the irreducible complexity of the different artists' (and students') lives – their experiences, personal histories, working attitudes, politics etc. – as well as with opening up other interesting intersections such as across artistic and design practices and between practice and education-oriented processes. We hoped the project would be as much about what to do next as what to do now (that is, as much about what the artists and the students could learn for future work, as about their specific design projects for artists' studios).

## A short involvement...

The artists arrived towards the end of the project, when the design studio was beginning to get into detailed design. They presented their own artistic work to students and the students presented their schemes to date. The artists then did weekly design tutorials and attended reviews (both within this particular studio and across all second and third year interior architecture students). Throughout, both students and artists captured their experiences and shared information via a blog and occasional seminars.

I feel we are still very much finding our way through the woods with this... but that we began to create a pathway between the spaces and students and the artists, building that understanding into their designs.

**Artists feedback 11/05/07**

I felt I wanted to productively wrap understanding around them.

The whole project only lasted four weeks...

# making discursive spaces

## The Discursive Spaces blog

We used a weblog as a way of capturing and communicating the process. This is now archived. [Visit the project blog](#)

## Capturing the process

During the **Making Discursive Spaces** project we attempted to reflect on what was happening... through seminars, tutorial discussions, via a blog and through feedback sessions.

## Tutoring

The tutorials were fruitful on both sides, particularly in working through issues in relation to a specific design:

For me the 1:1 contact, particularly when Rachel gave me such a good reference to an artist who I could go and explore – it was a perfect reference for me.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

A breakthrough for me was when both Naomi and Rubbena actually talked about about how they use their artist studio/space or any space when they are making work... so learning about, for example, the light and materials that were good to have around them.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

Caroline gave me some really useful information about cabinets with rotating shelves.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

The development of the pulley idea for accessing my storage staircase came out of the need to create access for a range of users, so the idea was developed to be more inclusive, but not really changed.

I just got so much exploring the lift as a separate and more meaningful fun inclusive experience alongside the obvious logic of lifts re: access.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

When Caroline talked about her freewheeling down the slope at the Tate, it was just very funny...

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

I felt I knew more about what was going on in my design through talking 1:1 with several of the artists.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

## Blogging

Using the blog was more problematic for both artists and students. This was partly difficulties in access to the internet and in registering for, or using the blog itself.

I couldn't get on it.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**

Sometimes I posted stuff up and it never appeared.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**

I spent some time putting my stuff up and then received no comments so I felt a bit disheartened.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**

It wasn't because of lack of access to it, more lack of time really.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**



I actually found the 1:1 more immediate and valuable.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**

More problematic though, were issues of language and tone. The blog aimed to engage with debates at different levels simultaneously – theory, practicalities, news and information-sharing. Some found it too academic in tone. Others felt unsure about how to use it and were anxious about what the different participants would think of their comments.

The language in the blog was quite academic and intensive, I found it quite alienating and it was hard to connect with it.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

I was concerned about how I came across. I didn't express how I felt because I wanted to be sensitive, so I didn't say half of what I would have liked to have said.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

I am not an academic and I would have to sit and think about what was being said and sometimes I would have to get my dictionary out.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

It would have been good to have had a space; to create a tone which allowed everyone to really say what they felt in images as well as in text.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

A flickr photo/image blog might encourage people to respond and bounce off each other's ideas and think visually without the need for words.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

Perhaps some agreed ways of using the blog to

encourage more free speech, quick reflections and easy dialogue.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

Were the students put off by tutors and artists being on the blog, mediated in part by them?

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

There was no anonymity... and there was the question re: different perception of tone, intonation... and not getting what you can usually get from facial expressions... that is missing in a blog.

**Artists feedback May 11th 2007**

In a way, the blog revealed most immediately the differences in participants' experiences and aims for the **Making Discursive Spaces** project – the tensions and potentially contradictory aims its academic, artistic and political threads.

This highlighted for me how much the project had been framed by my particular concerns as a (non-disabled) academic interested in understanding the diversity of experience of the built environment.

# making discursive spaces

## Giving up 'my room'

In theory I was interested, in setting up this collaboration, in giving those 'outside' architectural education the opportunity to challenge it's assumptions about what constitutes 'normal' interior and architectural space, 'normal' design processes or 'normal' educational frameworks.

### A personal background

As a non-disabled interior design tutor, I had been feeling increasingly uncomfortable gaps between by own research practice around social disadvantage in architecture and the kinds of design programmes I was teaching in the studio.

This was a double frustration; both with what felt like my failure to integrate concerns with social justice into design teaching in a meaningful (and non-heavy-handed) way, and with continuing difficulties in how disability is being framed more generally in relation to the built environment. I had been working for the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) and was struggling with the seemingly simplistic dichotomy between disabled and non-disabled people that the 'commonsense' framing of accessibility in architectural practice tends to both assume and reinforce.

### On letting go...

So there was an intention to unravel the controlling frame of design education itself– to shift (albeit momentarily) the locus of design expertise to the deaf and disabled artists. This was both about a personal risk (that of letting go of the tutorial relationship and of assumptions what the outcomes 'ought' to be) and the risk of no longer fitting into colleague and School 'normal' frames of reference, as embedded into our existing curriculum, project design, tutoring methods and assessment procedures.

This project was a small attempt to unsettle the existing structuring of the fields of interior design and architecture. I wanted to know whether these are capable of either apprehending or responding creatively to the disruptive impact of an 'outsider' set of

knowledges?

## On not letting go...

In reality I did not open up the students, tutors or the course to much of a risk after all; I had remained in control of setting the project and the processes by which the artists were invited to participate. The artists only engaged with students from other design studios during one, day-long review, something I had not even originally intended but was asked to do by the artist participants. And out of my own worries about how the artists might be 'seen' if they talked accessibility beyond our studio, I asked that students were mainly judged in relation to the brief and assessment programme they had been set, by their specific tutors and not solely on disability issues. One of the artists, in particular, found this an unacceptable restriction.

Sometimes I look back on this as a profound and unacceptable loss of nerve from my privileged, non-disabled position. Sometimes I think you have to set priorities on what battles you fight, where a short-term compromise can lead to a longer term success. What actually happened was that the review days were very powerful in displaying just how effective the artists were as creative critics across their diverse responses to theoretical, artistic, educational, design and use-related matters.

# making discursive spaces

## What We Found Out

### **Making Discursive Spaces**

was just a beginning – frustrating in many ways for both artists and students because of the shortage of time, and because the collaboration was organized at a very late stage in the design project. In this section we try and show what we found out, both productive and less successful.



**Student drawing showing different eye-levels as part of follow-up design project for an exhibition.**

The entire project has enabled me to start to articulate to landscape architects, architects, urban designers and planners in a totally new way. I can't get the idea out of my head that what we have all been focusing on is these areas of accessibility and that non disabled people pick and choose where access is allowed and acceptable... the worry for me is that the accessible places or the adaptations are devised because buildings and spaces were not inclusive in the first instance so then these additions are added that can continue to segregate you. I'd say just bliden get rid of them and start designing organically and ensure disabled people are part of the entire process. I may be being unrealistic but you get my drift?

**Email from participating artist 24th May 2007**

# making discursive spaces

## On feeling spaces

### ...for the students

The student response to working with the deaf and disabled artists was immediate. They all reported 'feeling' themselves much more intensely in the material spaces around them; expanding their awareness of their own bodily sensations and taking notice of barriers in the built environment they had previously ignored. They began to experience material space from the perspective of the differently abled, and to be energised by artistic work and creative engagements which challenged banal assumptions that disability was about merely adding platform lifts or ramps.



**A project tutorial showing groups of artists and students working together.**

It was very good, again I wish it had been earlier. It was great just being able to talk through an idea... not just the access thing, but just having some.' objectivity, apart from the tutors - someone else's opinion...

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

I feel like it's put me a step ahead.

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

They were so open with ideas and very supportive.

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

It really did help improve my design – making it

better and also accessible too.

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

I'd hit a plateau with my project, I was quite blocked and bored and contact with the artists really changed all that for me.

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

I'm not scared about it anymore – the access thing.

**Student feedback May 11 2007**

### ...for the artists

For the artists the situation was more complicated. They felt less sure that students were engaging with the issues, or had the capacity to translate these into creative design proposals.

Sometimes, I felt we were going around in circles and not getting through and sometimes you could just see them getting it...

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

Some of the students seemed to be avoiding access issues or maybe it was fear or not knowing.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

I (...) didn't feel that they truly reflected a range of disabled people's access needs.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

This was also an issue about the set-up of the project, particularly the late involvement of the artists in the design process and limitation of their allocated input

I felt that the mental gymnastics that were required in order to win the students around to my perspective - minus any detectable traces of Deaf Equality training - meant that the gulf between myself and the audience was too wide

for me to generate enough of an insight into deaf culture.

**Artists evaluation Sept 4 2007**



# making discursive spaces

## The difficulties for students

### A problem of translation

For some of the artist participants the the shape of the project raised big issues about whether they were willing or interested to go on working within the limiting constraints of mainstream university education. Others, though, became interested in how students' beginning awareness of sensory experience of space, and their willingness to listen, might better impact on their design work.



**Two students discuss their projects with Noemi Lakmaier.**

Some dived right in and some just dipped their toes in and some shuffled around like moles...'  
'Some got inside their building design, emotionally others couldn't achieve this.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

Some got inside their building design, emotionally others couldn't achieve this.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

### The educational context

Three different difficulties were identified here.

1. The fact that students were at different levels in their overall understanding of design, which affected how much they could absorb from the artists.

Some students coped with the set of circumstances and some were just busy coping with whole premise of the project and the course.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

2. There was what one participant called 'a problem in translation', that is, that many second year undergraduate students struggled with finding ways of translating their awareness and feelings about the qualities of space – and about these new ways of thinking disability – into design. They are, after all, only just beginning to explore how to interpret personal, social and cultural relationships with material space and to respond creatively and appropriately with designed interventions. They could recognise the artists' different insights but had very few tools to take these forward into a design method or realisation.

They weren't used to the way we were talking about how to change things creatively and make it better altogether weaving the access in through use of, for example, different materials.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

3. Finally, students were all too aware that this element of the project was not officially assessed; and therefore felt insecure or split about whether to engage completely with the artists, or to rely more on what they conventionally understood as a design project. A small minority of other tutors were also not supportive of incorporating deaf and disability issues into the design studio; which made students confused about how they should respond.

It felt hard to battle what was obviously the academic agenda and the way things are organised for the students.

**Artists feedback May 11 2007**

This added extra layers of complexity – not just about disability and design but also about educational experiences and levels, about design education frameworks and about what risks students felt they could take during their studies.



# making discursive spaces

## The risks for tutors

Whilst many tutors clearly enjoyed having the artists working in the studio, involving deaf and disabled artists did generate an element of anxiety and awkwardness amongst a few - a small amount of which was around 'how to behave' around deaf and disabled people.



**A student presents her work to tutors during a project review.**

## Disrupting 'normal' teaching?

But the main tensions were around the potential to disrupt 'normal' teaching and learning processes. This was both about the worry that accessibility would be over-emphasised (with the implied threat to design of its reduction to technical solutions); and about the risks of inappropriate comments about the work of students not being taught by the artists - where their comments at reviews could be seen as an 'unfair' critique of other studios' design projects and methodologies.

The response from students to working with deaf and disabled artists - despite initial fears about both the experience and the problematic impact on their projects in the wider context of the School agenda - was very positive.

I was quite fearful, scared really, I just felt quite worried about how the experience would be but it was a good introduction nevertheless and after I met the artists, It was really fine.

## The difficulties of change

But, as they hinted, this was against a feeling of some tutor resistance and lack of endorsement .

We would need to know that going through this and learning from it and feeling differently should be endorsed by all the staff, so they encourage us to build this thinking into all our assignments.

I just don't think I will not think these issues through the next time. The problem is when some tutors actually actively stop you from thinking about these issues.

I just hope the tutors will taking this on board and not say things like 'are you putting a lift in because you think you have to...?'

## The changing positions of tutors ...

The initial responses from some tutors to the project tended to be in one of two typical either/or categories; it had either to be a project about accessibility or it was an unwanted threat to the validity of other, more contemporary design methodologies. I felt that I had failed to properly explain to other tutors that **Making Discursive Spaces** was intended as a very different kind of proposed collaboration.

The potential for a different kind of creative to the existing structure of the 'field' of architectural education then, seemed to be invisible. The potentially disruptive impact of a completely Other set of knowledges were not initially comprehended, and some deep assumptions and anxieties around what constitutes the 'normal' revealed themselves.

However, as the project progressed, and particularly as deaf and disabled artists were involved in reviewing the other design studios, many of these tutor anxieties fell away. Though the crit process, much common ground was discovered.

## Some fragmentary conclusions

Despite some difficulties, then, we were able to gather some interesting fragments on how deaf and disabled artists can inform alternative ways of learning and teaching architecture and interior design; and some ideas about what we could do next.

# making discursive spaces

## Some useful lessons

### Raising disability awareness

Students were introduced to disability awareness issues in a half-day workshop, and through the artists' presentations of their own work. They then worked on with artists in a conventional tutorial relationship. Feedback made it clear we could have done this better.

The training was really good start. I would have liked more time, to go deeper though because everyone's perspectives – the disabled and deaf artists were all really different.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

It was a difficult for the students being new to fundamental access information and then asking them to find a creative solutions within their designs to achieve that access. Trying to get them to do too much over a short period of time. I think more preparative work prior to contact with the artists and to foster an ongoing approach to inclusivity.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

More exploratives and guidance, (...) so they were done jointly and understood alongside a methodology for using it. (disability awareness)

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

I think if we had been able to do our own exploratives of the Truman Brewery, it would have been very valuable.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

In different ways everyone felt that disability awareness should have been inculcated from the beginning of the design project, involved more preparatory work, should have been embedded through shared design activities as well as presentations, and could have been much more explicitly debated together throughout the duration of the project rather than as just as introduction. In addition, it was felt that the issues of Deaf culture and Deaf equality were not dealt with, and needed separate training to more general disability awareness.

## On the problem of time

Both the amount of time available for the **Making Discursive Spaces** project (about six weeks) and its timing (in the last, detailed, stage of students' designs) were both unintentional and very problematic.

In addition, the short time between obtaining Arts Council funding and the artists starting also led to organizational and timetabling problems. Most immediately it was difficult to arrange British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters as there is always a shortage of supply. This meant that the two deaf artists were excluded from the initial site visit, which was very unsatisfactory.

Finally, timetabling issues made it difficult to orchestrate all the artists together, because of their already busy workloads.

## On Sites

As part of this project we visited the site (in Brick Lane, London) twice. The artists felt we could have used the site as a way to better introduce deaf and disability awareness training, but not in a formulaic way:

I would have liked to have done an explorative of the building from my perspective as a deaf person/artist and to have shared that with them right from the beginning through a presentation.

**Artist feedback 11/05/07**

Exploring and sharing different artist and student engagements with the site would have immediately opened up some of the intersections between physical space, disability, experiential analyses and creative practices.

## Ideas and practicalities



In conventional architectural education the 'standard' formula is to start with strong conceptual ideas and then develop these into a detailed design. Whilst there are many challenges to this approach, the binary oppositions between ideas/functions and poetics/technicalities continue to resonate, with the practicalities of design all too often seen as the inferior and banal conclusion of an ideas - led design process. Disability is linked via accessibility to, and appears to reinforce, these negative associations.

In this project, because the students had worked from initial ideas related to an earlier study of fabric, it was difficult to explore how creative aspects of the experiential and practical could be re-introduced as a central and generative element.

We hoped that working with deaf and disabled artists could disrupt the artificial divisions between ideas/practicalities and poetics/technicalities. In **Making Discursive Spaces** we were unable to achieve such a shift, except in a few minor instances.

One student had a feeling that something was not quite right. She hadn't planned the lift in and the space was completely inaccessible (to me).

When she planned the lift that echoed the staircase, everything shifted and fell into place for the whole space: this changed everything...

**Artist feedback 11th May 2007**

The conundrum of how someone using a wheelchair might go up to the second floor with a friend brought about all sorts of considerations of ... platforms, stairs and speed.

**Artist feedback 11th May 2007**

Talking through how pleasant or unpleasant it was to move in the space...was really interesting. We were both getting there and she got there first!

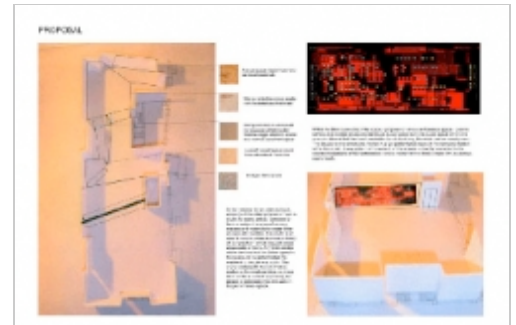
**Artist feedback 11th May 2007**



# making discursive spaces

## What makes good design

The issues that began to be raised about how to integrate the conceptual and the practical right at the beginning of the design process, rather than 'doing' one after the other, suggests that working with deaf and disabled artists has lots to offer design educators.



**A drawing of a student proposal for a sound generating gallery.**

Many design practitioners and tutors are also interesting in such an integration of conceptual ideas and detailed realisation. Many have been exploring issues around the body, for example, as a way of re-thinking older modernist and functionalist approaches to design. This has been both about understanding 3D space through more than just the visual, and about re-thinking the whole process of design, using concepts such as hybridity and embodiment.

However, writers from disability studies have, in turn, been criticising these newer approaches for 'leaving out' deaf and disabled bodies. Why, then, are these very interesting debates not reaching architectural and interiors theory or educational practice?

## Towards multi-layered engagements

In this project, we began to talk about what kinds of conceptual frameworks and design development methods might enable deeper, more multi-layered engagements between disability and building design.

To me, the artists seemed to be endlessly creatively challenging, in many different ways, the artificial splits in interior architecture education between concept/function, idea/detail, cultural/ technical and poetics/practicality.

The fact of having a disability made the functionality of objects and spatial relationships central and immediate (if in very different ways

for different people). Looking the practical and the experiential 'directly in the face' and starting from close-up, micro socio-spatial engagements and events, though, was not about limiting responses to ergonomic or functional solutions. The mapping of differently weighted variations of bodily sensations, sound, vision, movement, smell, comfort, etc., cannot be separated from either their bodily, human context, nor the social milieu in which they take place. In addition, the translations of these sensory experiences into design responses is generated through our simultaneously artistic and practical sensibilities.

Because they are young mobile able bodied, they don't consider functionality that doesn't have this at its heart. Design is very removed from their bodies.

**Artist feedback 11th May 2007**

Perhaps a consideration of putting them into their own bodies so moving away from architecture in a 'straight jacket' taking them into the experiential.

**Artist feedback 11th May 2007**

I felt my space, because disabled artists have helped me put me in my space...

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

Absolutely, I just got really fired by making something workable and exploring a full route through the design.

**Student feedback 11th May 2007**

## Disabilities and...

This was always about more than 'being' a disability. It was about concretely thinking the diversity and quality of embodied relationships in material spaces. It was about the importance of supplementaries, about not being interested in representing or explaining the lives as disabled people through material form and space, but in working through the different experiences of deafness and disability as a means of transforming and acting upon life and wellbeing for everyone.

It was about moving beyond nuts and bolts and able-ist view... and imparting the idea of multiple users and a transgressive use of space. We presented a 'metaphor', or way of looking at problems with language and real issues so it could be more rooted and real.

**Artist blog May 20th April 2007**

## From disabilities out

This means working from disability first rather than seeing it as merely an 'add-on' to normal design processes and products. This is more than accessibility; it has the potential to shift many conventional assumptions about how buildings should be designed. It offers ways of going beyond the, often implicit, assumptions of a standard user with a few, abnormal variations to a different vision of a multiplicity of participants with diverse desires and requirements.

After speaking to the artists, my creative design skills have become much more aware of attention to detail. It has made me realise that there are many faults and inconsideration in building design today.

I hope to further improve my design giving it an all round richness through understanding every aspect in the design of it and creating a inhabitable space for all members of the public to experience.

**Student feedback April 14 2007**

It is also about keeping debates and processes open rather than closed. Re-thinking disability and ideas is as much about the languages we use and the assumptions we make, as it is about exploring different design approaches.

Language is a barrier on many levels.

**Artist feedback May 11th 2007**

Not surprisingly then, there were conflicts and tensions throughout the project, as individuals brought their own experiences,

assumptions and intentions to it. The **Making Discursive Spaces** project wanted to face up to these differences rather than hiding them away.

# making discursive spaces

## Facing up to differences

**Making Discursive Spaces** contained many interesting differences between what the various participants wanted it to be for, and what they got out of it. This led to some constructive conflicts and also to a wide range of possibilities around how to take the project forward.

### Disability and artistic practices

Disability Arts is an umbrella term for artists who do work related to their experiences of disability. **Inside Out**, the group from which this project grew, was for artists particularly interested in interpreting their relationships to the built environment via a variety of media.

Through the artists' presentations of their work, students began to appreciate the differences between artists who saw their work as a direct response to the barriers put in front of them because of their disability, and those who saw their artistic practices as informed by, but not centrally about, their disability.

For the artists, this raised interesting debates about differences in approach within the deaf and disabled community. So, for one of the deaf artists, for example, both the lack of awareness of deafness as cultural discrimination rather than a disability (on the basis of refusing to recognise BSL as a proper language); and the inability to really think through the impact of Deaf culture on design, made his experience of the **Making Discursive Spaces** a frustrating one.

By the time I arrived, the students had already established ideas for creative solutions that did not include the deaf cultural perspective. Discursive Spaces, it became clear had long since moved out of that initial stage where other peoples input is most crucial to the formation of ideas

These differences raised questions about how different artists saw the project; how they wanted to engage with it, and what they saw as its successes and failures.

## The educational context

Differences revealed themselves most directly in relation to the educational context of a university-based interior architecture course. For the participating artists this increasingly framed what they had hoped to do.

It felt important to give support on whatever level people were processing really

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

Being able to suggest practical solution or shift perceptions concerning functionality and space proved to be very rewarding, as did the opportunity to suggest various sources of inspiration.

**Artists evaluation; 4th Sept 2007**

I was concerned that they may have felt intimidated by us and the tutor, so didn't necessarily open up as much as they could have. It might be that it was a bit overbearing, so I think we'd need to look at dynamics together and agree ways of working.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

The questions increasingly became about what could be an appropriate, creative and impacting relationship between deaf and disabled artists within the context of the learning experience for interior design students.

## Roles and responsibilities

The artists viewed themselves variously as practitioners, clients, mentors, collaborators and tutors. It was sometimes unclear how much they were responsible for the student's overall academic development, for example, or for insisting on changes to a students work.



In addition, they ended up being (due to circumstances beyond our control) very much an additive element to the design project, brought in when students were close to completing their design. This was unsatisfactory for everyone and raised questions about roles and responsibilities more generally.

Finally, project design and co-ordination was done by the in-house design studio team. There were many tensions on access to, and control over, both content and organisation. For the artists this led to questions about what terms of reference they would want for future project like this.

## Doing and interpreting

Another tension was between those who focussed their interventions directly through shared collaboration over the work; and those who wanted to stand back and interrogate the whole project process.

Exchange through 'doing' was the mode most students and many of the artists felt most comfortable with. They recognised and enjoyed the conventions of design tutoring face-to-face. Most of the responses to this experience, as it happened, were very positive from both students and artists

However, requests to reflect on, and write about, this process (through the blog or personal diaries for example) was clearly less interesting or relevant. All of the students and some of the artists were much less comfortable with these other, parallel, modes of operation.

Some artists did use the blog. These tended to be see themselves in both the role of academic/researcher as well as artist/practitioner. Here, the emphasis was on how what we were doing could be interpreted back into a wider context. Both these approaches – and their inter-relationships were productive but raised questions about where **Making Discursive Spaces** and **Inside Out** should go next.

# making discursive spaces

## Next Steps

### **Making Discursive Spaces**

was always going to raise more questions than it could answer. It turned out to be hard to open up discursive spaces in the context of a conventional architectural education project. But we have learnt many lessons; there are many ways we can each take these forward in our own work; and there are some possible next steps for the project itself.



**Artists involved in the follow-up exhibition design project pose for the camera.**

I think it is so important that we see the experience as a pilot or starting point (...) so lets grab it and wrestle with it and make recommendations to make it better... and ourselves more powerful and productive and 'heard and seen' within it.

**Evaluator's email to artist participants July 2007**

# making discursive spaces

## Summary of lessons learnt

This project aimed to ask many questions. Here, we summarise what we have learnt from this short collaboration between deaf and disabled artists and interior architecture students:

### Overall benefits

- Working with deaf and disabled artists introduced students to a rich awareness of the diversity of experiences of material space.
- Bringing deaf and disabled artists into an interior architecture studio as tutors has opened up the potential for creative relationships with the course in the future.

### For design project work

- Students developed a deep sense of their own bodies in space.
- They struggled to translate disability issues into design learning experiences.
- Students responded very positively to the learning experience and wanted it more completely embedded in their studies.
- Students wanted to go on communicating with the artists after the project.

### For tutors

- Some tutors were initially made anxious by disability issues being introduced into the studio, but then responded very positively to the artists presence.
- Non-disabled people could take more responsibility for preventing the continuing invisibility of deaf and disabled people in architectural education.
- It is important to contextualise disability issues through deaf equality and disability awareness training for students and staff, in consultation with deaf and disabled people.

### For architectural education processes

- Conventional curricula, conceptual approaches, teaching methods

and assessments make it very difficult to introduce outside influences, such as those from deaf and disabled artists, on the educational process.

- We need to find ways of 'letting go' of not just what students are taught in the studio, but how they are taught and by whom.
- Acting as a facilitator to enable 'outsiders' such as deaf and disabled artists to engage directly with design students is a vital role for design tutors.

## For artists

- There is an opportunity for deaf and disabled artists to design creative and productive methods for introducing disability awareness and deaf equality training to design tutors and students.
- It is essential to be involved from the beginning of a project, and have time to work through issues explicitly.
- There is considerable value in working through shared design activities, such as through representations of a particular site or space, to develop ideas on disability and the built environment.

## For educational collaborations

- We need to explore innovative methods for better integrating practicalities and ideas at the outset of design projects.
- There is real value to working from diverse deaf and disabled experiences 'outwards' rather than adding them 'on' at the end of a project.
- It is important to have explicit discussion of the complexities of different positions in relation to Disability Arts so as to communicate and debate different modes of artistic interpretations of the built environment.
- It would be worthwhile to continue and develop 'Discursive Spaces' around disability and the design of the built environment.

## For making more Discursive Spaces

- There is an urgent need to work with deaf and disabled artists and others to develop shared collaborations that begin to capture the diversity of users; and which offer methods for translating such multiplicities into good and inclusive design ideas.
- There is an opportunity to begin a critique of contemporary architectural education which opens up gaps in the artificial and false dichotomy between functional accessibility and more contemporary poetic, but able-ist approaches.
- This project was too limited in its ambitions and only began to offer new ways of bringing disability into architectural and interior design.
- Deaf and disabled artists and others need to lead the way, through

collaborations such as this, in developing innovative and creative approaches to making disability central rather than marginal.

- The framing of Higher Education study through specific patterns of curricula, assessment and teaching and learning methods makes it hard for 'outsiders' to break in, except as clients or participant receivers of services.

# making discursive spaces

## Further resources development

Jos Boys is currently undertaking further research and developing educational resources on disability and architecture, funded by a grant from CETLD at the University of Brighton. The project is called 'So What is Normal?' [See work in progress](#)

## A second Discursive Spaces project

In Spring 2008, some deaf and disabled artists worked with Interior Architecture students on a practices-based project, to design an exhibition. These artists were Caroline Cardus, Damian Toal, Rubbena Aurangzeb-Tariq, Miles Thomas, David Dixon and Noemi Lakmaier.

## Towards the next time

### Doing it better (different) next time

The initial project ended in June 2007 with the artists exploring what terms of reference they would want to work in a educational context around building design in the future. This was first about the potential of developing similar projects in schools of architecture and related subjects.



**Artist Sarah Pickthall uses performative gestures to express a point to a student.**

Individual voices with collective vision/ambition...

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

Ensure our contribution comes from our arts practice firstly, as well as our experience as disabled people.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

Be involved in the design and training around an experiential intervention from the start.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

## On artistic access and control

It was also about working on multiple fronts. The aim was to challenge the attitudinal and physical barriers embedded into the built environment through many different routes. This was also about taking more control over the process than **Making**

**Discursive Spaces** had involved, about putting deaf and disabled artists as lead drivers in challenges to existing non-disabled people's assumptions.

Need to keep on developing different test beds, infiltrating the architecture/design and training profession.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

Develop the model to work with other institutions, building resources continually so they can see what we've done and how we might work together.

**Artists' feedback 11th May 2007**

## The responsibilities of non-disabled people

Within this framework, non-disabled people also have a responsibility to listen to, engage with and respond creatively to the rights and demands of deaf and disabled people, without reducing their diversity and complexity, or attempting to 'speak' for them.

For the student participants in this project, next steps were about both continuing to develop an understanding of disability equality as a legal issue; and about recognising the importance of disability issues to their studies and (future) practices.

It's the law... and now we've had experience of what that means for disabled people.

**Students' feedback 11th May 2007**

What needs to change is the profession. Everything should be grounded in inclusion and awareness.

**Students' feedback 11th May 2007**

We could have gone through 3 years at University and still not have heard anything about this, so we would have gone into an architect's practice and be completely green. This can't be right.

**Students' feedback 11th May 2007**

I want to suggest that deaf and disability issues, rather than being marginal to most design teaching, offer the potential for a richly positive disruption of contemporary architectural theories and practices. But these issues need shifting beyond the language of 'accessibility' and located instead centrally in current post-modern and post-structuralist debates about the body and space.

To engage with these issues properly, tutors in architectural and design education need to open up what we do to diverse users from beyond the academy. We need to have the courage and willingness to invite in 'outsiders'.

Ah, but at the end of the day... you're still in control as the one with the design expertise... so what are you really risking? Are you prepared to risk the explosion of the hegemony of standards and aesthetics in the design industries if that's what it takes to fully liberate disabled people from their imposed silence? Wouldn't it be interesting to stretch this to examining whether the interior design and architectural fields' inherent structures are even capable of apprehending the shattering impact of a completely Other set of knowledges...?

**Referee response to Jos Boys draft research paper about the Discursive Spaces research paper.**

## Research and resource development

To take this area forward within architectural and design education needs more research, more resources, more support for collaborations with deaf and disabled artists and more examples of good practice. Steps forward here might include:

1. Developing new areas for research - taking disability issues in design beyond accessibility and intersecting instead the most recent work in disability studies with that from contemporary architectural and related theories about the body and space.
2. A commitment to listen to, and engage, with deaf and disabled artists – supported by resources which aid tutors and students in developing their awareness of, and creative responses to, disability and design.
3. Networks which facilitate projects between deaf and disabled artists and architectural education; and with architects and other built environment professionals and enablers.



## ...and a return visit

One of the positive outcomes from the **Making Discursive Spaces** project was that the students wanted to work with the artists again; and that some tutors were very keen to have the artists back tutoring on other projects.

**Student feedback May 11th 2007**

Can we still contact the artists? It would be so helpful. Because of this the **Making Discursive Spaces** project, which was planned to be completed by the summer 2007, continued into 2008, with deaf and disabled artists from **Inside Out** coming back to be involved in another short project, for an exhibition design with a real client.

## The power of building relationships

Much of the student feedback from this second interior architecture project related to its broad aims. They saw similar positive things; learning from working collaboratively with others, having a real client and real budgets, have to work to real deadlines. And they saw similar negatives; the problems of working in groups, difficulties in effective project management and in managing the project alongside other workloads. The feedback on the artist-tutors was again overwhelmingly positive – particularly in what could be learn't from the additional perspectives they brought:

Tutors input was useful as they have a different point of view to our normal course tutors.

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

Glad to have a tutor from a different field because it makes us look at designing in a different way.

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

Tutors really helpful

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

Very valuable in questioning every detail, hands on approach, motivated and guided in the right direction

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

Inside look into the everyday lives of deaf and disabled artists, the problems they face with architecture.

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

It made us consider things differently (...) Having a sign language interpreter during projects made the project feel all the more real.

**Students' feedback 8th April 2008**

Artist-tutors also said they enjoyed their sessions, noting that they were learning from the process as well as the students, gaining confidence and the ability to offer knowledge appropriately. The focus on a project which combined reality with ideas was also valued:

It was great to have a project with the potential to be realised. This was clearly unusual and maybe a bit worrying for the students, but this is where our input became really valuable, in conceptual as well as practical terms.

**Artist email 20th April 2008**

The main issue for artist-tutors was the shortage of time for tutorials:

It would have been helpful to have a day with them in the long gap before the review day, to discuss progress.

**Artist email 20th April 2008**

Needed more days to offer tutorials time to develop trust to work on their project ideas.

**Artist email 22th April 2008**

This remains an underlying issue – probably for much architecture and design education generally. Most courses are under pressure to have less part-time and visiting tutors. This continues to make it difficult to enable 'outsiders' to be properly involved or to bring their perspectives to an already full curriculum. One of the greatest successes, in the end, of **Making Discursive Spaces** is that it opened up opportunities for deaf and disabled artists to engage constructively and creatively in design education, to display and develop their abilities as tutors, and to build up relationships with existing staff and students on the interior architecture course.

I would be keen to continue this process, as we are now developing a relationship with the department, understanding how we can work together with the students and tutors.

**Artist email 22th April 2008**

At the end of **Making Discursive Spaces**, I am left with a very positive sense. There are tutors at the University of Brighton who have been quick to understand the value of the artists' presence and have been central in creating further opportunities. Most of the students have enjoyed and engaged with the experience. And many students have been vocal that they really want to go on learning how to build issues of deafness and disability into their design projects.

Good to have an alternative view of people, not only looking at a space as a visual experience but how people with disabilities use it.

**Students' feedback April 2008**

Disabled access is something that should always be considered, yet is not usually emphasised in studio projects.

**Students' feedback April 2008**

Working with Inside Out offered a different perspective to evaluate our work.

**Students' feedback April 2008**

So many thanks to all the artists, tutors and students who have been involved in **Making Discursive Spaces**, and with thanks for support from Arts Council South East, the BA(Hons) Interior Architecture course at the University of Brighton, in particular Glen Thurgood and Julia Dwyer.

# making discursive spaces

## \*Jumping through Hoops

is a recent disability art project, co-ordinated by Diablo Arts. [Go to Jumping through Hoops](#)

## \*\*Squaring the Circle

is another recent project between deaf and disabled artists and architect students, based at the University of Portsmouth. [Go to Squaring the Circle](#)

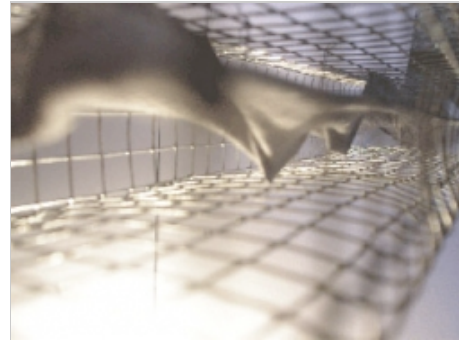
## More InsideOut

In December 2008 Arts Council SE funded the next stage of work for deaf and disabled artists interested in the built environment, called Architecture-InsideOut, in which Jos Boys and the University of Brighton are a partner.

[Visit Architecture-InsideOut](#)

## Going in circles?

Throughout **Making Discursive Spaces**, the notion of circles and circling has returned again and again.



**A student model which explores ideas about forming space and textures through sound waves.**

Sometimes, I felt we were going around in circles and not getting through and sometimes you could just see them getting it...

Often this was about a sense of frustration, about how the artists could only circle around the students and the project, without 'getting in'. It was about having to jump through hoops\*, about remaining misfits in the process (the round peg in the square hole) and the difficulties of squaring that circle.\*\*

At the same time, circles have positive associations – with the social circles that Deaf people create through sign language, with the power of wheels to move forward, with the outward ripples that circle away from a stone thrown in the sea. Circles (unlike the points and lines of individuals and their trajectories) are collaborative, with a shared focus; and when put in motion they can have accumulative power, a snowballing effect; What **Making Discursive Spaces** wanted to generate - the small beginnings of a chain reaction.