

'As materials for culture, the stones of the modern city, seem badly laid by planners and architects.'¹

'... It has never been a feature of the culture, social ethics and/or practices of design professionals to see themselves as part of wider political processes. Architects seem to have limited understanding of the relationship between values, design objectives, and the design intentions derived from them, with design theory tending to concentrate on the technocratic and technological, reducing questions of access and form to the functional aspects of the subject.'²

Architects disable. This is not simply a deliberately provocative statement, **it is a fact.** Architects and their work profoundly and negatively affect the daily lives of disabled people. In this short essay I want to try and provoke Irish architects into taking disability seriously and to **stimulate a debate** about the philosophy and ethos of architecture and the role of architects in Irish society by criticising severely the profession as presently practiced and taught. My observations are based on a number of detailed empirical studies that have investigated disabled access in Ireland in relation to the labour market, education, shops, and public services, where poor architectural design was a prime factor in severely limiting opportunities and services.³

Architecture disables...

At the core of the 'social model of disability' is the notion that it is not impairment that disable people, it is society. Whereas the 'medical model of disability' views disabled people as victims of nature or fate and blames their exclusion from society on their impairments, the social model rejects such determinism. Instead, it argues that the reason

why disabled cannot take part in activities and events enjoyed by able-bodied people is because they are not catered for. Here, the fact that someone in a wheelchair, for example, cannot get into a cinema or theatre or school (and so on) with steps, is not due to the fact that they cannot walk or climb steps, but because there is no accessible ramp. In this instance, the steps disable, not the impairment. In other words, it is architectural design that disables.

As Rob Imrie argues forcibly, whether architects like the notion or not, they **are** predominantly practising 'design apartheid' whereby they design and construct buildings and spaces that assume a 'sameness', an 'able-bodiedness', amongst a population.⁴ Such an assumption, grounded in the ideologies of modernism that still largely underpins architectural ethos, 'lock' disabled people out. 'Apartheid designs' litter the Irish landscape. Steps without ramps or lifts, buildings without accessible toilets and rooms, kerbs without dishing, doors that are too narrow, cash machines and phone boxes placed too high, and so on. Given that between 12-18 per cent (depending on who is, and how they are, measuring) of the Irish population is disabled, a significant proportion of society is affected by narrowly conceived architectural practice.

Architecture has social and economic consequences...

This 'design apartheid' has numerous social and economic consequences. Limited access to buildings means limited access to employment. This in turn means unemployment or underemployment, which means a restricted ability to earn and

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confines many disabled people to poor, cheap and inadequate housing, welfarist lifestyles and social dependency. Further, poor access limits the ability of disabled people to take part in social events such as visiting pubs, clubs, museums, leisure centres, cinemas, theatres, and can lead to social isolation from the rest of society.

This is **not** overstatement. As study after study demonstrates, disabled people are profoundly affected by access issues. Simple things like steps with no ramp, lack of tactile indicators, no accessible toilet, poor colour contrast, lack of induction loops, do have serious, demonstrable consequences that determine whether a person can get into a building or access public space and take part in the activities within. It is a fact that most buildings—public and private—in Ireland are inaccessible. Where there is access it is often inadequate and tokenistic. Any access survey or discussion with disabled people will reveal this to be the case.

Moreover, architecture, as architects well know, is not simply about form and function, it is also about symbolism and meaning. We live and interact in spaces that are ascribed meaning and convey meaning. Buildings, of course, communicate specific, maybe unintentional, messages to disabled people, as Napolitano⁵ illustrates :

'Good inclusive design will send positive messages to disabled people, messages which tell them : "you are important"; "we want you here"; and "welcome". if the way that disabled people are expected to get into a building is round the back, past the bins and through the kitchens, what does that message communicate? How will it make a disabled person feel?'

Architects are professionals and they should accept the consequences of their actions. They do have a voice and they do have power to shape architecture. To argue otherwise is reduce architects to technicians; the puppets of others. This is a label that I suspect most architects would reject. In this sense, architects cannot have it both ways, they are either creative, visionary, responsible shapers and developers of ideas, concepts and design, or they are not.

Such messages, as disabled people in study after study confirm, have important implications for the shaping of society more broadly.⁶

Architects are responsible for these consequences...

It is the responsibility of architects to be accountable for the social and economic consequences of the buildings they design. There is no point blaming the state of the economy or the person or company that commissions the building or public space. The bottom line is architects design the buildings, it is therefore architects who disable. Architects are professionals and they should accept the consequences of their actions. They **do** have a voice and they **do** have power to shape architecture. To argue otherwise is reduce architects to technicians; the puppets of others. This is a label that I suspect most architects would reject. In this sense, architects cannot have it both ways, they are either creative, visionary, responsible shapers and developers of ideas, concepts and design, or they are not.

There are no excuses...

If architects want to argue that they are professional practitioners, not technicians—that they are speaking, thinking, acting subjects—then in my view they have no excuse not to be socially conscious and to take responsibility for social and economic consequences of their designs. In this context, I can see no excuses for designing buildings that exclude certain segments of the population. Whether intentional or not, architecture **does** through its present philosophy and practice 'lock' disabled people out of many aspects of society. I cannot see how such a differential outcome is defensible in a civilised society.

It is true there are economic concerns, but this, I think, is simply an issue about scales of economies. If every building had to be accessible, disabled adaptations would rapidly come down in price because they would be standard rather than exceptional items. Two other, alternative economic arguments can be made. First, if buildings were accessible, and

thereby allowed disabled people more opportunity to earn, not only would they not be recipients of social welfare they would be contributing tax payments. In other words, there is a realistic argument to suggest that the state should subsidise making existing architecture accessible. This is not 'pie in the sky', this is the justification used in the USA when introducing the **Americans with Disabilities Act**, a piece of legislation that ensures that public buildings are accessible to all. Second, it is almost certain that in time Ireland will be instructed by the European Union to revise the building regulations and to provide full legal recourse for disabled people to challenge exclusion through architectural design. Any short-term gain in constructing inaccessible buildings will be wiped out by the expensive cost of retrofitting and altering already built structures to make them fully accessible.

Many architects will say that it is impossible to discount economic factors given the reality of bidding in a competitive market. The fact remains, however, that most access features, with the possible exception of a lift, are relatively inexpensive and will add little if anything onto the overall cost. Economic rationality in this context is little more than a convenient excuse.

Furthermore, in my opinion, any recourse to purely economic arguments inevitably draws on libertarian models of social justice and limited ideas of citizenship. Consequently, I believe that architecture needs to engage more fully with the philosophies of social justice if it is to reconstitute itself as a progressive, enlightened practice with respect to disability (and indeed other aspects of cultural identity).

Architecture and social justice...

Social justice relates to the fair and equitable distribution of things that people care about such as work, wealth, food and housing, plus less tangible phenomenon such as systems of power and pathways of opportunity. In relation to architecture it concerns issues over who has, and who should have, access to a building and public space, and along with associated issues of safety and the ethics of security and surveillance. There are many different forms of social justice⁷ and practical constraints limit discussion to sketch just four in relation to disabled access.

Egalitarian theory argues for equality in terms of distribution of wealth and power across all members of a society regardless of ability and inheritance. Egalitarians would see the lack of disabled access as an affront to their

principles of equality across all people regardless of impairment and demand that the building or space be modified.

Utilitarianism seeks the greater good for the greatest number. Utilitarians would treat the lack of disabled access as a public problem that ought to be resolved for the greater good as it imposes long term access problems for occupants and other costs to society (e.g. welfare payments).

Libertarianism prioritises the value of the individual over the state and society and suggests that the free-market is inherently just. It is essentially modelled on the notion of 'survival of the fittest'. Libertarians would put the rights of apartment builders at a premium and what happens between the parties involved is a private matter. If the developer wants to build an inaccessible building that is their prerogative. If a disabled person cannot access that building tough—that is the 'natural law' of the market.

Contractarianism seeks to find a distributional arrangement of resources that all involved consider just (not necessarily equal). Contractarians would look at the lack of access from all sides, arguing that if the non-disabled

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people are not willing to live in such differentiated conditions then disabled people should not have to either and all buildings should be made accessible.

While these descriptions are caricatures, it should hopefully be clear that each of these visions of social justice views disabled access to buildings and public space differently. With the exception of libertarianism—which in its pure form would reject all forms of social or moral aid including charity and welfare (it is the logic of the far right)—they all suggest that there are strong moral reasons to make universal design a core component in the rationale and lexicon of architectural practice. At the very least, I think there are good reasons as to why architects should engage with theories of social justice, if only to be able to justify the dominant ethos of practice of architecture rather than taking it as read.

A new philosophy...

Given the discussion so far, it is my contention that architects have a moral imperative to address the disabling consequences of architectural design. Architecture, I believe, should be enabling. And architects should be designing and constructing universally accessible buildings.

This means rejecting, for example, Le Corbusier's or Frank Lloyd Wright's conceptions of designing for 'modular man' based on their conception of 'normality' (a premise that still implicitly underpins much architecture, even that which claims not be modernist). It requires instead a recognition of the full diversity of ability across people and adopting the tenets of universal design—design that facilitates access for **everybody**.⁸ This is not to say that form, aesthetics, structural engineering, are not equally important, but that at the heart of any design should be a recognition that what is being designed, whether it's a public toilet or a skyscraper, should be accessible to **everybody** regardless of impairment and that this access is equal (that access does not become two-tiered, e.g. round the back and through the kitchens). At no point should access be sacrificed to other concerns, especially aesthetics. The tenets of universal design should not be viewed as additions to a toolkit, or as something to be occasionally or selectively used, but as fundamental shift in how architecture is practised. A new, generic way of thinking. As such, it should not be taught as a separate module during training, it should be inherent to the whole practice as an underlying ethos.

New practices...

Along with reformulating theory underpinning practice, I believe there should be a parallel investigation into new modes of emancipatory practice. In relation to disability, this means a recognition that architects unless disabled themselves do not know what it is like to be disabled. One of the big fallacies that many disabled people are presently fighting against, in relation to all kinds of professionals who affect their life (e.g. social workers, doctors, community workers, planners, and so on), is that these professionals know best; that they understand disability, and what it is like to be disabled, and know what would be most suitable for a disabled person. Imagine if every part of your life was mediated by someone else. That somebody decided that because your legs or eyes or ears or whatever did not function in the same way as the majority of people that you were also incapable of being able to think and act for yourself; that you were incapable of knowing how buildings disable you and how this might be remedied. The simple and most effective solution to creating inclusive buildings is to consult with all users of the building, focusing particularly on those populations who might have different needs. This means blending the expert

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knowledges of architects with the tacit knowledges of disabled people. This has an important side-benefit in that it empowers those disabled people at the same time as it seeks to emancipate them from 'design apartheid'. The logic of this participatory approach with disabled people has now been well explored outside of architecture.⁹

The challenge...

The challenge that I am presenting is for architects in Ireland to change their underlying philosophy and ethos and become the champions of universal design, creating inclusive landscapes and seeking, through their lobby, to strengthen disabled peoples' access rights.

While there are a few architects in Ireland that do take disabled issues seriously, the vast majority only consider disability largely as an afterthought, designing and creating buildings that are more accessible primarily because they are cajoled to by legislation and building

regulations. It seems to me that in such cases these architects are often reluctant followers rather than enthusiastic endorsers, and only do the minimum necessary without further prodding by interested groups. In many cases, they fail to follow the regulations, creating buildings with little or no access. There is no point denying this, local access groups can provide hundreds of cases.

It is time architects took the lead and **transformed** their profession. This does not mean adding disabled access in, it means a fundamental rethink about the ethos of architecture as a profession and practice. It means making **universal design** (and this is by no means limited to disability) a core, underlying, commonsensical aspect of architecture. It means engaging with issues of social justice and thinking progressively about the social and economic consequences of architecture and acting responsibly and justly in relation to these consequences.

Inevitably, the response to this call to transform will be that it is unrealistic, that architects live in the 'real world' of clients, competitiveness and economics. It will be suggested that ensuring disabled access, while honourable and desirable, will be impossible unless every architect/practice toes the line, and economic and structural factors dictates that this will not be the case. This view suggests that architects, as a profession, are powerless to change the conditions under which they operate, instead merely being slaves to the market/client. This is clearly not the case. Architects work within professional guidelines and charters defined by national professional bodies. These bodies provide a

template of standards, practices, ethics and ethos that actively shape architectural endeavour. In other words, architects do define their architectural practice at an institutional level. The Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland (RIAI), the Architectural Association of Ireland (AAI) and other architectural bodies must then play a key role in reforming the codes and standards of practice, ensuring that universal design—that everyone can access a building or space—is a core feature of Irish architecture. Moreover, they should take an active role in providing support to architects and architectural practices while such a reformation occurs. My hope then is that the RIAI and AAI, in association with their members, will adopt a progressive attitude and seek a transformation of architectural ethos and practice.

I am more than happy to debate further in building material the arguments I have made. Such a debate, I think, could only be a productive exercise.

Notes

- 1 Richard Sennett, *The Conscience of the Eye : The Design and Social Life of Cities* (London : Faber and Faber, 1990), p. xi
- 2 Rob Imrie, *Disability and the city : International perspectives* (London : Paul Chapman Publishing, 1996) p. 76
- 3 see Rob Kitchin, Peter Shirlow and Ian Shuttleworth, 'On the margins : Disabled people's access to and experiences of employment in Donegal, West Ireland,' in *Disability and Society*, 13(5), 1998, p. 785-806; Paul Anderson and Rob Kitchin, 'Disability, space and sexuality : Access to family planning services', in *Social Science and Medicine*, 51, 2000, p. 1163-73; Rob Kitchin and Frank Mulcahy, *Disability, Access to Education, and Future Opportunities* (Dublin : Combat Poverty Agency, 1999) p. 32; Rob Kitchin and Robin Law, 'The socio-spatial construction of disabled-access toilets,' in *Urban Studies*, 32, 2001, p. 287-98
- 4 Rob Imrie, *Disability and the city : International perspectives* (London : Paul Chapman Publishing, 1996)
- 5 Sue Napolitano, 'Mobility impairment' in G. Hales (ed) *Beyond disability : Towards an enabling environment* (London : Sage, 1995), p. 33
- 6 Rob Kitchin, 'Out of place, knowing one's place : Towards a spatialised theory of disability and social exclusion' in *Disability and Society*, 13(3), 1998, p. 343-56
- 7 see David M. Smith, *Geography and social justice* (Oxford : Blackwell, 1994) and David M. Smith, *Moral geographies* (Oxford : Blackwell, 2000) for a discussion that relates to geographical and planning concerns.
- 8 see Rob Imrie, 'The body, disability and Le Corbusier's conception of the radiant environment,' in Ruth Butler and Hester Parr (eds) *Mind and Body Spaces* (London : Routledge, 1999)
- 9 see Rob Kitchin, 'Ethics and morals in geographical studies of disability,' in James Proctor and Davis Smith (eds), *Geography and Ethics : Journeys through a Moral Terrain* (London : Routledge, 1999) p. 223-36

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