

## **In the Wake of DisOrdinary Architecture 2022**

### **Thinking Outside of the Box**

This account is a personal reflection on the DisOrdinary Architecture course that I attended in August 2022. I was very pleased to be invited to join the event and what transpired exceeded all my expectations. In what follows I will attempt to draw out the main themes, ideas and feelings that I am left with as a result of my immersive participation in the course. The founding creator of the course Professor Alan Penn, argues that the current architectural design sector and the built environment it spawns is unhealthily fixated on the visual. Professor Penn and the designers of this course believed that by observing how blind and visually impaired creatives respond to a carefully thought out series of workshops and initiatives, much can be learned by the wider architectural design community.<sup>1</sup> Below I have headed up the four main themes 'Box 1' to 'Box 4' to emphasise the importance of the idea of the *box* both as a metaphor for containment, differentiation and categorisation and also as a way of describing a building.

My own PhD practice based research into blind aesthetics has many common strands with the stated aims of DisOrdinary Architecture so it is hoped that some mutually beneficial cross-fertilisation of ideas, processes and methods might emerge from the encounter between these two projects.

To a great extent this account is a record of relationships. First and foremost the relationship between human blindness and the built environment, secondly the relationship between blindness and creativity and thirdly, and by no means least, the relationships between a group of visually impaired people gathered together, often in basement environments, as they wayfind their way through a weeklong residential architecture course in unfamiliar and ocularcentric surroundings. As such, I will pepper the following account with a few anecdotes that add a social commentary to the whole.

### **Box 1**

#### **Starting from Difference<sup>ii</sup>**

The 12 visually impaired participants of the course gathered at UCL's John Adams hall of residence, London WC1 in the midst of the record breaking summer heatwave. Our initial challenge was to navigate the social landscape of the gathering while navigating the labyrinthine complexities of the basement of the UCL hall of residence where we were to sleep. We were a very diverse bunch with nothing much in common apart from visual impairment and a general interest in artistic creativity.

The complexity and diversity in our response to finding our way around both the physical space and the social space was striking. Given that we were all invited because of our common experience of life with visual impairment, our differences in how we managed both the physical and the social space were dramatic and noteworthy.

### **Box 2**

#### **Feelings and Stuff**

To kick-start the week's proceedings we were all taken to the UCL Institute of Making which is part of the Bartlett School of Architecture. We were introduced to the work of the institute and their vast array of materials by the curator of the facility Sarah Wilkes.

Following this multi-sensory and very physically engaged introduction to materiality we embarked on a series of exercises that were designed to strengthen and examine our *relationship* with hand-picked materials from the collection. Mandy Redvers-Rowe steered us through this process during which she encouraged us to consider four questions: What does the material under consideration feel like? What memories does it evoke? What function do you think it has? How does it make you feel? I find it particularly interesting to consider what questions 1 and 4 have in common and how they differ. The close relationship between feeling as emotion and feeling as proximal touching is being interrogated here. But like the relationship between seeing and knowing, and their colloquial interchangeability, they have to be treated with extreme care.

### **Boxes within Boxes**

On the walk back to our accommodation that afternoon my guide Otis noticed the preserved figure of polymath Jeremy Bentham displayed in a glass case in the lobby of the adjacent UCL buildings. Jeremy Bentham, as well as being credited with the invention of philosophical Utilitarianism, conceived of and designed Millbank Prison, Pimlico, which is now the site of Tate Britain.<sup>iii</sup> I mention this because Millbank Prison was originally designed as a panopticon; a building in which all parts of the building can be viewed from one central viewing point. This optimising of the optical where every cell (or box!) is visible is arguably the antithesis of the DisOrdinary Architecture project which is attempting to relegate or realign the visual aspects of building design.

### **Social Comment 1: The Communal Kitchen**

#### **Finding Your Feet and Finding Your Voice**

Most of the visually impaired course participants were accommodated in the basement of the hall of residence. The basement consisted of a series of underground box room bedrooms including a communal kitchen all interlinked by a series of confusing and labyrinthine corridors. Once we had settled in our rooms the kitchen became the room to which we gravitated both to meet people and to get refreshments.

It was here that the process of finding our feet socially began in earnest. Interestingly those of us with some vision took on a prominent role both socially and practically in assisting those with less vision to find their way around the kitchen and indeed the basement area in general. This was the start of a social dynamic that persisted and shifted in interesting ways throughout the week ahead. A complex ecology of hierarchies, anxieties, vulnerabilities, frailties, irritabilities were exchanged, traded, choreographed and fought over throughout the week in a largely unspoken sub-text to the week's proceedings. The communal kitchen was the place where this drama was acted out.

### **Box 3**

#### **The British Library in Fragments**

The British Library, Euston Road, hosted us for a full day of events that have left an indelible trace on my memory and which were central in informing the creative process that followed in the workshops. The events included an audio described building tour, a talk from the buildings manager Richard Warren followed by a series of workshops intended, I think, to heighten our individual and our collective sense of placing the body in the built space.

Richard's talk consisted of giving us hands on access to a huge range of examples of building fragments that make up the fabric of this extraordinary building. The body parts of the library were handed around for us to touch and feel, smell, sonify and even taste! Hand rail fragments, door knobs, fragments of floor tiles and ceiling tiles variously featuring brass, bronze, wood, stone, clay and leather were all passed around for us to engage with.

The afternoon was perhaps, for me at least, the climax of the visit and possibly the week. Mandy took us through a series of mindfulness workshops designed to reinforce awareness of our bodies, both collectively and individually, within the built spaces of and around the library. These workshops involved slowly spinning our bodies on the spot through four points of 360 degrees and then audio describing the experience. These mindful exercises were performed in various hand-picked locations in and around the library. Some of these exercises were choreographed by Mandy others were chosen by participants themselves but all of them dramatically heightened our sense of self in a panoramic, pan-sensory space. The body and the environment are, of course, an indivisible unity; our bodies are never discontinuous with an environment. These exercises just reinforced that fact and encouraged us to name the nature of that connectivity.

### **Social Comment 2: Meals Out**

From the get-go we were required to sort out our own evening meals and entertainment. This requirement exacerbated the social dynamics within the group and referred to above; those with some vision, local knowledge and internet facility took the lead and the rest of us followed. So a series of snakes of visually impaired people following a leader were to be seen most evenings seeking out restaurants, cafes, or supermarkets. On the one hand this was a positive, bonding necessity on the other hand it embedded social hierarchies based on relative visual acuity which can be problematic.

### **Box 4**

#### **The Jig and the Well Spring of Creativity**

##### **Introduction to the workshop**

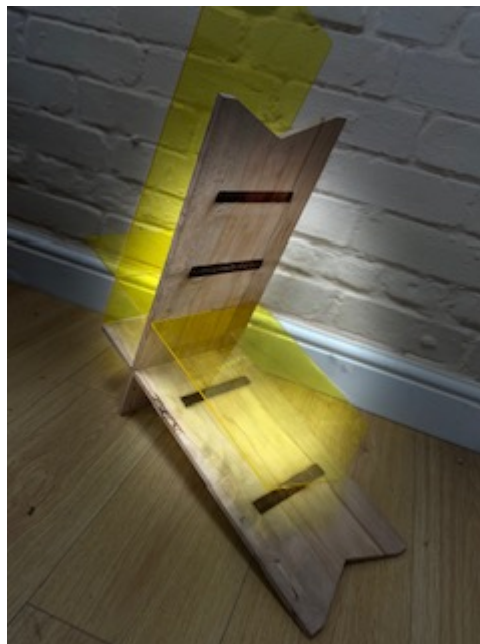
From the outset of the course we were asked to choose between one of two course pathways. These were firstly a workshop project entitled *Box of Feelings* and secondly a studio project entitled *Minimum Conditions of Creativity*. The workshop option gave us a clear practical brief involving making a box by using a range of tools and materials and which expressed our personal responses to the British Library experience. The studio pathway was more conceptual and involved a consideration of what it is that drives our personal creative impulses. The personal base elements that we need in order to produce some kind of design intervention in a space. This was an extremely difficult choice for me to make as I regard these two strands of creativity to be two indivisible sides of the same coin.

Duncan, James and Tom were the technicians who guided us through the workshop element of the DisOrdinary Architecture course. Health and safety, achieving outcomes, maximizing autonomy and independent working, maximizing creative freedom and agency and minimising stress were the stated aims of Duncan and his colleagues. Given the diversity of the participants' visual impairment, workshop experience, and personal workshop ambitions, this was an exciting, ambitious and fabulous undertaking.

## Thinking Outside of the Box; Feeling Within the Box

My own contribution was within the workshop pathway and is entitled *Thinking Outside of the Box; Feeling Within the Box*. As a general rule and as a totally blind person I find buildings a curious mixture of altered perception, enigma and uncertainty. The British Library was no exception! Key elements within buildings take on contradictory and paradoxical characters when experienced as a blind person; windows become walls and walls become windows, floors and ceilings drift away from their usual roles, interiors and exteriors become confused and less of a binary opposite. The British Library with its nautical themes exaggerate and magnify these phenomena. In the atrium area of the library the outdoors floor patterning comes into the interior space, the flooring creeps up columns, and the vast atrium space rises up to the roof as layers of interior accommodation jostle with the atrium for a place in space in what amounts to an architectural and spatial war zone.

Accordingly my own box design shivered and shook under the influence of this experience! Huge waves of thoughts crashed against the sides of my box shattering it asunder and encouraging me to reconstruct the idea of a box in radically new ways. I took the conventional four sides of the box apart and re-attached them in a way that deliberately confused what is outside and inside, deliberately avoided enclosing space and deliberately muddled the functional roles of transparency and opacity in the plains that now criss-crossed my ragged, deconstructed 'box'.



## The Jig

I want to pause here to make special reference to the use of the jig in the workshop making process. Duncan Meerding had created a number of jigs to help us measure, repeat and to work independently and to move away from dependence on conventional tools and metrics.

The jig allows the maker to measure accurately without recourse to numbered rules. It allows the maker to perform multiple repetitions of the same task without loss of accuracy. It's the application of relative rather than absolute metrics. It is a spacer, it is the straight edge, it is the stamp, it is the block, it is the template, it is the stencil, it replaces or provides an alternative to the measure with its unitary subdivisions, it is the mark made flesh.

### **Social Comment 3: Morning Counterpoint**

I awoke early on the final morning of the course in order to prepare for the busy day ahead. As I lay in bed gradually coming to I became aware of the morning chorus of city sounds as the night slowly turned to day. Vehicles beginning to move, sirens occasionally wailing, doors slamming, builders beginning to build, and, of course, birds beginning to sing. Prominent among these birds were seagulls with their plaintive and evocative cry ringing out across the city. As I lay there thinking about how outside sounds mingle with interior sounds and how my open window acts as a doorway for sounds and cool air as well as for light, the arresting sound of a young woman in full throated orgasm drifted in through my window from a nearby bedroom. The woman's primal wailing mingled with the seagulls' cries and the city sirens provided a wonderful morning counterpoint and was, I thought, a fitting climax to a great week of creativity and discovery!

### **Conclusion**

The box can be so many things; a room, a building, a container, a prison cell or a secure and comfortable living space. But the box unseen or partially seen and encountered through visual impairment is fascinatingly different. The box experienced primarily through touch, through sound or sonics or through smell or taste is a box with a difference. It is still a container or a prison cell, or a comfortable living space but its relationship with the human user has changed radically.

As noted above what a box or an environment feels like and how it makes you feel are key questions when trying to understand the relationship between a person and a built space. The sensory thresholds, liminalities and horizons that delineate and inform a person's understanding, and hence their relationship with a space, shift radically with blindness. Walls dissolve, windows become opaque, flooring and ceilings become sound boards. The threshold between the interior and the exterior zone become blurred and ambiguous. Horizons can become proximal encounters such as the soles of the feet touching the floor covering or possibly distant sonic horizons that emanate from way beyond the limits and boundaries of the built space. DisOrdinary Architecture and the course reviewed above has made important inroads into a better understanding of these altered perspectives and it represents a vital step in the journey towards a more inclusive built environment and equitable aesthetic climate for everyone.

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<sup>i</sup> *ARCHITECTURE BEYOND SIGHT 2018*, 2018, <https://vimeo.com/296974975>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jos Boys and Zoe Partington, "Starting from Difference with Zoe Partington & Jos Boys," MP3, F\_PODCAST Intersectional Spaces in Practice, accessed January 17, 2023, <https://f-podcast.podigee.io/4-starting-from-difference>.

<sup>iii</sup> "Millbank Prison," in *Millbank Prison*, accessed January 16, 2023, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millbank\\_Prison](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millbank_Prison).