SO WHAT IS NORMAL?
DISABILITY AND ARCHITECTURE RESOURCES
FOR EDUCATION

Final Evaluation Report

Jos Boys for CETLD, January 2010

INTRODUCTION

The *So What is Normal?* project was funded in order to meet the following outcomes:

i) Provide baseline data on how inclusive design is currently integrated into teaching and learning of architecture, interiors and related subjects in the UK.

ii) Explore what resources exist on disability and the built environment within the partner organisations, centring on the British Architectural Library (BAL) collections at the RIBA and V+A.

iii) Begin to collect narratives from deaf and disabled people about their experiences of the built environment (from existing web, paper, audio and video sources) in collaboration with disability organisations and individuals.

iv) Produce innovative pedagogic research on disability and building design which sets a framework for the development of teaching and learning materials.

v) Develop pilot resources on disability and the built environment; and test these with selected groups of architecture and interior architecture students.

vi) Disseminate materials and outcomes across both HE and museum sectors, so as to inform debate and enable shared learning.

vii) Propose strategies and funding possibilities for future development of disability and built environment resources, following lessons learnt in this project for both university and museum/gallery contexts.

This report will first outline the activities and outputs in each of these areas, before evaluating project outcomes and summarising the key issues raised. The report will conclude with the SWIN project's intended continuation strategy.

ACTIVITIES AND OUTPUTS

Provide baseline data on how inclusive design is currently integrated into teaching and learning of architecture, interiors and related subjects in the UK

This project begun by reviewing the research undertaken by the Centre for Education and the Built Environment (CEBE) Special Interest Group in 2002 into inclusive design learning and teaching in the UK and attempting to update it, so as to build up a picture of the current situation in architectural schools around teaching and learning of disability issues. Because of the nature of HE (with it's considerable autonomy given to individual tutors in the design of modules, projects and approaches) this could only give a partial snapshot of activities, rather than provide any comprehensive or hard, quantitative data. This overview was obtained by emailing all heads of school of architecture in the UK (from the SCHOSA list) as well as contacting an existing personal network of UK tutors known to be interested in architecture and disability.

This first 'trawl' indicated that the situation was much as it had been when the CEBE SIG reported – return rates were low and examples of activity were few and far between, mainly focussed on individual tutors with a particular enthusiasm - and that attitudes were still very much as they had been when I had studied architecture in the 1970s.
To give an example, see the following email exchange with Jeremy Till, who was then Head of School of Architecture at Sheffield University and someone who is rightly well respected for his school's social commitment (particularly around gender issues):

> "...one cannot cover all aspects of the design of the built environment, but one can set up an ethos in which issues such as inclusion, access, autism, the vernacular, safety (to name just of the few recent surveys) are inculcated as values to be taken seriously. I would say, but then maybe I would, that this is the ethos at Sheffield. We explicitly refer to the user as a core part of our focus, and in this see the user as diverse (including issues of disability). Our 'mission' is specifically about the social and environmental responsibility of the architect. I argue that the development of this ethos and responsibility then can be applied to the more specialised areas."

This, together with other comments and materials received, seems to support and extend the hypothesis in the original proposal as follows:

• Architectural educators perceive social commitment and responsibility as a central component of the teaching and learning of architecture

• Architectural education emphasises a generalised social responsibility, without necessarily being able to explain its particular methods for inculcating such knowledge, attitudes and approaches, or for critically reviewing/improving them amongst either students or tutors.

• Disability, accessibility and inclusive design remain articulated as a 'specialist' area, somehow separate to, and not integrated with, the rest of architectural education

• Individual interpretation/intervention around disability is left to tutors, sometimes supported by discrete elements within the curriculum as a whole

• Architectural educators perceive a huge number of potentially competing 'demands' on the design process and on design education (sustainability, clients/users, legislation, RIBA criteria etc); and are frustrated at thus easily being framed as 'inadequate' or 'irresponsible' by many single 'special interest' groups.

These baseline findings provided evidence of the urgent need for a new approach to disability and architecture; and indicated some potential difficulties in how the material should be framed so as to engage the intended audience of architectural tutors, students and those involved in related built environment and design subjects.

Explore what resources exist on disability and the built environment within the partner organisations, centring on the British Architectural Library (BAL) collections at the RIBA and V+A

A researcher, Katie Lloyd Thomas, was contracted by the SWIN project to:

review what resources exist on disability in the BAL collections
select suitable materials (including images) for the So What is Normal resources website
draw out key issues on disability and architecture historically

Her conclusions can be summarised as follows:

• Keywords: the language of disability - its concepts, assumptions and terminology - changes through time, and (as the Buried in the Footnotes[1] also research indicates) keywords lists are therefore a very valuable way of both reclaiming the history of disability and architecture from invisibility and

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[1] "Buried in the Footnotes: the representation of disabled people in museum and gallery collections" Jocelyn Dodd et al, AHRC and Leicester Research Archive
http://www.le.ac.uk/museumstudies/research/Reports/BITF2.pdf (accessed 03/06/06)

opening it up for critical review as socially and culturally constructed. It is important that non-disabled people do not ignore or 'avoid' issues around disability because of their embarrassment with historically common words like cripple or deviant.

• Patterns of materials in the BAL collection: in undertaking keyword searches, it became clear that there seem to be periods where disability is in the forefront of architectural activities and others where very little material exists in the BAL collection. Further research would need to be undertaken to clarify why.

• Value: The BAL collection is rich in resources around the history of disability and architecture, of which this project can only skim the surface. The SWIN project highlights how little research has been done on this topic to date.

• Website resources: Materials selection could have been based on a variety of approaches; the proposal was that it be arranged around key themes, drawn from the issues arising[2].

Katie therefore wrote up the historical sections of the SWIN website resources to cover both how 'to do' disability and architecture research using the BAL, and to offer a series of thematic summaries. Steering group members had a half-day reviewing a cross-selection of material chosen by Katie at both the V+A and the RIBA, so as discuss and validate proposed themes/selections, and to draw out any other themes. Most importantly it was agreed that, as much as possible, deaf and disabled people's perspectives on this material should be incorporated.

Stacks of Questions: accessing the BAL Collection
http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/Stacks

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[2] In steering group discussions it was suggested that the SWIN resources should have an international dimension. Whilst this would certainly add to their value, the framework and time constraints of this project means that research concentrated on the UK.

Researching Disability and Architecture: routes through the BAL collection
http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/routes
Timeline of disability and architecture
http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/Timeline2

In terms of the *So What is Normal* website resources, there were some useful cross-overs between Katie's and Jos' research (for example around Deaf history and culture) which helped to link materials across the site. However there remain gaps in historical research (mainly because of time/cost restraints), most particularly around eugenics, the impact of both wars on images of disability, post – 1945 welfare state provision and the effects of disability activism from the 1970s in the UK. The contemporary period also remains under-developed as an area. Because of the limitations (size and timescale) of this project, it was decided to prioritise themes most relevant to intended audiences, to 'point' to other resources wherever possible (such as the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) library), and to explore potential sources of funding for additional research.

Begin to collect narratives from deaf and disabled people about their experiences of the built environment (from existing web, paper, audio and video sources) in collaboration with disability organisations and individuals

As part of the initial research into disability and architecture, several recent books, articles and websites were identified which provided source material on different deaf and disabled people's experiences of the built environment. These were summarised for the *So What is Normal* website, in one of Jos's theory papers Taking a disability-led perspective (http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/disabledperspectives) using direct quotes as much as possible. In addition, other disabled and Deaf individuals – Sarah Pickthall, David Watson and Paul Redfern - were funded to include their commentaries throughout the site. And, because both Sarah Pickthall and Jos Boys already have good connections with the Architecture-InsideOut group (having worked together on related Arts Council SE-funded projects which explored built environment issues through the creativity of deaf and disabled artists http:/www.architecture-insideout.co.uk); and had also been involved in an associated project at the University of Brighton, bringing disabled artists in as tutors to work with interior design students, (http;//www.discursivespaces.co.uk) many of the disabled and Deaf artists involved in these projects were also happy to comment on the SWIN work informally.

Crucially, however, it became clear that the original proposal had not integrated a disability-led perspective very effectively, tending to 'locate' deaf and disabled people as commentators on materials as these developed, rather than as central to the developmental process itself. This is covered in the 'issues raised' section.

Produce innovative pedagogic research on disability and building design which sets a framework for the development of teaching and learning materials

This research began from an interest in how disability issues might be better embedded within the teaching and learning of architecture in the UK. This is often framed as a 'problem' of lack of interest in social, human-centred or inclusive design within architectural education. Here, the issue was argued differently; that the problem lies in how disability is understood. Current debates and design projects within education perpetuate an artificial 'oppositional' split between user 'needs' and artistic sensibilities which sets up not only a divide in the educational community, but also limits disabled people to 'performing the category' of special, different and difficult. The new research undertaken here argues proposed that disability needed to be framed in other ways than via the concepts of 'accessibility' and 'inclusive design'. It shows how the language and approaches of 'accessibility' has clearly failed to gain much purchase within architectural education over the last 30 years and suggests engaging with more recent shifts to post-modernity and post-structural ideas, particularly in how these have informed disability studies, contemporary architectural theories and more recent methods for the teaching and learning of architecture. Rather than remaining stuck in 'accessibility' which relates to an earlier, modernist and functionalist paradigm, disability and architecture can only be thought differently by engaging with contemporary cultural theories and practices. Background theoretical research was therefore undertaken as follows:

- Critical review of contemporary disability studies

- Critical review of current architectural and related cultural theories (including post-colonial and feminist/post-feminist studies of space)

- Developing critique of notions within architecture of the 'user' and within cultural theory of the 'other'; and towards the alternative concept of 'participants'

- Beginning to explore relevance of research methods which investigate everyday social and spatial practices, such as ethnomethodology

It was decided to provide these background theory papers as downloadable pdfs on the website:

Taking a disability-led perspective
(http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/disabledperspectives)

Beyond Accessibility? Re-thinking the user in architecture
(http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/beyond_accessibility)

Challenging the 'normal': towards new conceptual frameworks
(http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/challenging)

Occupying (dis)ordinary space (with Pam Shakespeare)
(http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/occupying)

This research also informed the overall structure and content of the SWIN website resources; and is leading to the articulation of a series of potential concepts and techniques. After several attempts at different categorizations it was decided that sections should be categorized simply as follows:

Home
Learning
Noticing
Designing
Histories
Re-thinking
Futures

In addition, the informal group involved began to explore concepts such as the *Architecture of Imperfection* and *Slow Space*, as examples of the kind of alternative concepts to 'accessibility' which capture something of the underlying shift in thinking. This approach aims to start from a disability-led perspective on architecture; but is not only about disability and architecture, whilst continuing to enable a constructive 'purchase' on key issues for disabled and Deaf people. Slow Space was initially articulated as a concept through some initial observational research which suggested that where disabled and Deaf people were engaged in everyday practices together (in this case a conference) activities-in-space were usefully 'slowed down' because social and spatial relationships were explicitly negotiated and opened up for critical and close attention rather than assumed or undertaken – as Walter Benjamin famously noted - "in a state of distraction".

The concept of Slow Space is now being extended, in collaboration with others, and explored in relation to architecture and the Slow Cities movement, (which was discovered accidently after the concept of 'slow' was

being considered - http://www.matogmer.no/slow_cities__citta_slow.htm) - offering a much broader base in social responsibility, and potentially enabling productive cross-connections with, for example, sustainability issues.

The architecture of imperfection was suggested as a concept by Sarah Pickthall, bringing together her own experiences of disability and her knowledge of Japanese culture: *"Wabi-sabi is an attractive concept for disabled people - an aesthetic ideal which embraces the beauty in imperfection and not only applauds it but seeks it ... "* (www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk/re-thinking)

The next step would be to explore these tentative notions with different audiences, to gauge their potential value to, and impact on, both architectural education and disabled people. Slow Space as a concept was first was introduced at a CETLD Design Scholarship Seminar, to very positive responses. This will be discussed further in the Continuation section.

Develop pilot resources on disability and the built environment; and test these with selected groups of architecture and interior architecture students

Content
Parallel to the theoretical and historical research, content was being developed for the *So What is Normal* website resources. This aimed to offer resources that didn't 'tell' students or tutors what to do, but to open up the underlying shift in approach to view, to suggest the questions it raises, and to gave examples of the potential for creativity in design such as approach offers. The language was to be clear, lively, multi-layered and engaging. Whilst this approach was implemented, it began to emerge that 'bigger' questions remained, both for the design of the site itself and for its proposed intention to 'intervene' in current teaching and learning practices more generally. Because the resources were not just supporting an existing and shared paradigm, but aiming to challenge and shift it, the methods for attempting this needed considerable attention. This is dealt with in greater depth in the next section on issues raised.

Website design
In addition, the project took a different approach to the web design process than initially proposed. The original intention was to build the *So What is Normal* project website resources in one of the suite of CETLD applications. However this was problematic for two reasons;

1. As lead researcher with experience of other blogging software, I found the previous version of the ELGG Web 2.0 application non-intuitive, and not necessarily appropriate for building this kind of website. I also wanted website templates where I had as much personal control as possible over both uploading/updating content, and over template design. Whilst with time and consultation I am sure these issues could have been resolved, the project was of such a short duration that a decision was made to use other content management systems.

2. Whilst the CETLD recommended Web 2.0 and associated applications meet accessibility guidelines and are compliant with W3C, it was considered essential that for the *So What is Normal* website the very best practice on online accessibility be used; and that, in keeping with the ethos of the project, it is not treated merely as an 'add-on' to an otherwise 'normal' web design.

It was therefore decided to undertake a two stage process, first using a free web-building package for initial researcher-led explorations of possible site layouts, content, navigation and connections, and then employing a web design firm called Surface Impression, which specialises in accessible sites, to build appropriate templates for *So What is Normal?*, into which final content could be easily entered and updated by the project researchers for pilot testing.

Web350 (http://www.350.com) was chosen for the initial build as it is free in its basic form, intuitive to use, does not require any separate software, and enables changes to both content and layout (though the ability to move and re-size all elements of the underlying template and to re-designate any element as text, image or link). An initial site was constructed in outline, for testing with members of the deaf and disabled artists group, as well as other relevant experts, so as to make appropriate amendments. This was very helpful in developing a clearer and more simplified version of the resources, and section headings.

The second stage was for Surface Impression to translate this site into a series of fully accessible templates, using their ContentCurator CMS. This has been a good tool for content format and uploading. However, it should be noted that the SWIN project underestimated the amount of time needed to provide properly accessible descriptions and re-sizing for images; and this aspect of the prototype remains incomplete. No audio-descriptions were undertaken, as had been hoped; some images are only thumbnails with alt-text descriptions unfinished. These problems were exacerbated because of

the slow process of obtaining selected images from the RIBA British Architectural Library, costs involved and limitations on allowable sizes.

It was also decided to attempt to build a visual timeline which was fully accessible; both in support of the SWIN history research and as an added and useful tool for the ContentCurator SMS. Due to time and cost constraints, this remains a beta test version.

However, a final website prototype is now completed for *So What is Normal?* which will be transferred to a university server as one of the 'legacy' resources from the CETLD project.

Initial Evaluation
At the same time, due to the time slippage at the beginning of this project, the intended deadline for completing the initial *So What is Normal* online educational resources was delayed. This was due to:

1. Under-estimation of amount of in-depth theoretical research required
2. Delays in website design
3. Under-estimation of time taken for scanning/digitisation and copyright clearance of RIBApix/BAL drawings collection/BAL photographic collection images.

The associated necessary shift in project stages meant that the planned testing process became 'out-of-sync' with the academic year, missing the window of opportunity before the summer break. Alternative means of engaging students and tutors with the draft website were attempted, not linked to a specific design project or other unit of study at the University of Brighton, as had been previously intended. This involved the design and development of a survey monkey questionnaire (aimed at both architectural students and staff; and disabled and Deaf participants). Only 3 responses were obtained from architectural education, but their comments matched the Sarah Pickthall's conclusions from her review of disabled and Deaf impressions, completed in August 2009 (see Appendix 1):

"Overall the evaluation of the site has been positive by a diversity of disabled and Deaf people. It is noted that it presents quite a glut of information at one sitting, sometimes a little difficult to decipher but made up for in its sometimes refreshingly engaging and provocative focus on quite contemporary cultural ideas of 'slow space', 'Deaf space' etc.

From a disability/ Deaf perspective it is lauded for its departure from accessibility norms and reflects current departures led by disabled artists and those involved with architectural training who are exploring a different way of developing design that meets the diversity of all our lives and living and including disabled and Deaf people talking about what this really means in practice.

However it is important to note that as a standalone resource, those asked were clear that it will amount to nothing unless – it is

o   used with real people responsible for architectural training and delivery
o   has a weave of architects: comment and practice also woven through
o   has a clear plan as to how it will be disseminated and to what ends – to gauge interest, and broker uptake
o   developed into resources: projects, actual delivery itself – disability led
o   trialled within architectural training at different academic establishments through current and applied modular learning
o   updated with examples within each section and made relevant for today

It would be favourable to develop its reach alongside a project such as http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk providing a means and connection where those disabled and Deaf artists working in and around public realm and the built environment, might develop their skills with academia and training and be part of changing the way accessibility is understood and translated into places and spaces around us."

Throughout the summer of 2009, contacts were made with potential architectural courses and modules where the SWIN resources might be tested in the academic year 09/10. These included University of Brighton, Birmingham City University and Queens University Belfast. However, these discussions were not successful, an issue that will be dealt with in the next section.

Propose a programme of dissemination to the end of the project and discuss with steering group and other project stakeholders.

Dissemination was orchestrated around four areas - network building, linking to other resources, giving presentations/writing associated articles, and developing promotional materials. Activities in each of these areas is now outlined:

Network building
The *So What is Normal* project developed from my previous action research in the area of disability and architecture, both via a consultancy with the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE) (http://www.cae.co.uk) and through the Making Discursive Spaces (http://www.discursivespaces.co.uk) project in Interior Architecture at the University of Brighton. It is now running in parallel with an Arts Council SE funded project entitled Architecture-InsideOut which is exploring ways for architects and deaf and disabled artists to collaborate productively and creatively on improving the design of the built environment for diverse users (http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk). The project also linked to the new MA in Inclusive Arts Practices, run by Alice Fox, started at the University of Brighton in September 2008.

This means the *So What is Normal* project was immediately connected to an informal network of tutors across architectural education in the UK interested in disability and diversity; to practitioners with expert knowledge in the area; and to a strong local and regional network of disabled and Deaf artists interested in the built environment. The intention was therefore to build on these networks, so as to disseminate/debate the project as widely as possible. To date this has been through Architecture-InsideOut artists, the project steering group, a developing email list of practitioners/academics/specialists (added to through, for example, the Design Scholarship seminar and other word-of-mouth connections at conferences etc.,) and connections being made with groups such as RIBA Architects for Change, CABE, the 'Buried in the Footnotes' group at Leicester University and the V+A Architecture Gallery.

Linking to other resources
As noted above, it was the aim of this project to link its online resources as widely as possible. This was undertaken firstly through 'sister' sites such as Architecture-InsideOut and Making Discursive Spaces.

In addition, there was an intention to write new threads for Wikipedia (which is very sparsely written in the areas of disability arts and architecture, yet is a central source of information and connections for many different potential audiences); to link to other CETLD projects, particularly the RIBA Research Wiki; and to disseminate through other academic networks, for example, through case studies for HEA-ADM and CEBE. Unfortunately, due to a change in employment of the lead researcher, none of these connections was developed.

Papers/presentations disseminating the SWIN project
A series of papers were written as this research developed, intended to disseminate and test different aspects with different audiences. As already noted, some of this work has also been informed by related projects working with disabled and Deaf artists. Another related aspect has been to begin to explore how ethnomethodology might also be applied to processes of

teaching and learning so to inform how educational resources might be developed and the kinds of 'spaces' they require (see issues raised section below for a more complete discussion.) The following papers were produced:

"So Who is Normal? (Dis)abilities and architectural education": Trigger Paper for ELIA Teachers Academy, Faculty of Arts and Architecture, University of Brighton 12/13 July 2007

"Anxieties of Difference": Paper Presentation for Unspoken Interactions - exploring the role of emotions, interactions and embodied knowledge in practice based subjects, organised by the Creative Learning In Practice CETL London College of Fashion University of the Arts London, 10 December 2007

"So What is Normal?" CETLD Design Scholarship seminar, University of Brighton, 8th January 2008

"Anxious Interactions?" Workshop with Chris Mitchell (RCA) at The Third Symposium on Social Learning Space: Redesigning Universities organized by ASKe CETL, Oxford Brookes University, 17 March 2008

"Between unsafe spaces and the comfort zone" Paper for eLearning and Learning Environments for the Future organised by SOLSTICE, Edge Hill University Omskirk, 5 June 2008

In addition, a write-up of the Architecture-Insideout project in the CAE published *Access By Design* journal, june 2009 - which circulates across both architectural practices and education - also promoted the *So What is Normal* project.

Seminar presentation to architectural staff, School of Planning, Architecture and Civil Engineering (SPACE), Queens University Belfast, June 2008 and meeting with PLACE (NI Architecture Centre

Seminar presentation (with Zoe Partington-Sollinger/Architecture-InsideOut) at Engage, Kilkenny 14/15 July 2009

Conference presentation: "Occupying (Dis)ordinary Space" (with Pam Shakespeare) at Occupation: negotiations of constructed space, University of Brighton 2-4 July 2009

Presentation: "Towards Slow Learning Spaces: inculcating new communities of practice around inclusion and sustainability in design education"
E&PDE Conference Creating a Better World, University of Brighton 10/11 September 2009

Developing promotional materials
Due to the difficulties of embedding the project into any specific architectural school context, or of being able to undertake a proper evaluation with architectural staff and students, consideration was given to the development of promotional materials (a poster and postcard) which could be disseminated across UK Schools of Architecture and associated sites. However, this initiative is currently on hold, as it is felt it may not be cost-effective (see discussion in issues raised section, below).

It was hoped that this promotion process could lead to an evaluation of impact - that is the extent to which the project has 'creatively and effectively shifted existing practices' - in tandem with promotion and dissemination to architectural tutors and students through the 09/10 academic year. This was to be based on three forms of evaluation; a brief online questionnaire evaluating impact on tutors and other stakeholders by asking them if the site has challenged their preconceptions and whether they could of will use it to inform their teaching and learning; the second will be a task-based scenario, offered as part of a 'roadshow' half day workshop to UK architectural schools, supported by capturing discussion seminars afterwards. The third depended on specific tutors being willing to use SWIN as part of their learning and teaching for the academic year 09/10, so as to evaluate its effectiveness and impact; and to gain more examples for the website itself. Due to the shifting role of the lead researcher and the ending of the CETLD project itself, none of these developments have been possible.

Propose strategies and funding possibilities for future development of disability and built environment resources, following lessons learnt in this project for both university and museum/gallery contexts

At the mid-way stage of the SWIN project, a series of possible 'futures' were discussed, outlined as follows:

Developing a research cluster around Inclusive Practices
In the summer of 2008, Jos Boys and Alice Fox (MA Inclusive Arts Practices co-ordinator) won a Faculty Research and Development Fund award to scope the possibility of developing an Inclusive Arts Practices network. The

research, by Clare Melhuish, indicated considerable interest from associated practitioners and educators internationally.

Developing historical research on disability and architecture
One of the background projects to this one was a funding bid prepared (but not submitted) to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a history of disability and the built environment, based on archival material at the Centre for Accessible Environments (CAE). In discussions with the new CAE Chief Executive, a possible development of this bid that brings together materials from CAE, BAL and the Helen Hamlyn Centre at the RCA was mooted. Such an online resource would be required to be primarily aimed at a non-HE community (that is, to be developed with and for deaf and disabled people, or with primary/secondary school teachers.)

Further testing on Slow Space and related concepts
Whilst the concepts of the Architecture of Imperfectionand Slow Space are still at early stages of development, it would be very valuable to work towards funding opportunities which would enable these to be tested in a variety of situations. One possibility is to collaborate with Architecture-InsideOut in exploring ways of taking such ideas forward, with disabled and Deaf artists, and into architectural practice and education; and to look for Arts Council or associated funding.

Embedding So What is Normal resources usage
The resources, as developing, explore both alternative concepts around disability and are framed by a proposed approach to embedding different approaches to the subject into existing architectural education practices. In order to both test the validity of the project's underlying hypotheses and to enable the resources to have an impact on UK architectural education, additional funding would need to be achieved, for example. through the AHRC networks and workshops schemes grant (to provide a forum for continued discussion and development of ideas and practices around disability, diversity and widening participation) or through knowledge transfer funding schemes.

ISSUES RAISED

In describing the activities and outputs from the *So What is Normal* project, some key issues which affected the effectiveness of the project have been highlighted. Here, I want to expand on the following areas in turn:

- The importance of embedding a disability-led perspective

- Modes of intervention in teaching and learning

- The problem of generating a paradigm shift

Embedding a disability-led perspective

The initial approach to involving deaf and disabled people in this project was to ask Sarah Pickthall, an experienced evaluator and disabled artist, to undertake the overall evaluation of *So What is Normal?*. After introductory meetings, she argued that the project as planned would only give deaf and disabled people the opportunity to provide feedback on a 'final' product, rather than being centrally involved throughout. It was therefore agreed that Sarah's role should be redefined as two-fold:

• Critical friend – acting as a critic of the project throughout its development, especially where it suffered from not taking a disability-led perspective, as a process of ongoing evaluation

• Facilitator – enabling other disabled and Deaf artists to be involved throughout the project, so as to centrally contribute to resources development

This re-designed programme of activities for Sarah involved a change in budget, and enabled disabled and Deaf artists adding materials to the website to be paid a fee. Sarah's involvement also raised questions about how a disability-led perspective can be achieved through a project where the two lead researchers are non-disabled and where disabled people make up a minority of the steering group. It has highlighted the importance of not treating disabled people as either the 'objects' of a research project or mere commentators on its outcomes.

In addition, the *So What is Normal* project was obliged, as part of University guidance, to make a research ethics statement where students and/or staff are involved in research trials. In addition, the project needs to engage with two other aspects of legal and ethical procedures. First, the research and its outputs need to be conscious of obligations related to both the University's Disability Equality Scheme and to the architectural profession's responsibilities under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). It is important that the form and content of the website supports both these schema. This was intended to be undertaken in three ways:

• Incorporation into resources, materials related to DES and DDA, such as support sites for disabled students and tutors and guidance on disability awareness and disability impact assessment, as well as links to key equality and disability organisations.

• Explicit information on, and discussion about, disability equality issues, social commitment and the importance of taking an 'ethical' position as an architectural student or tutor

• Ongoing review from disabled and Deaf experts on site form and content

Second – and re-iterating the point made about taking a disability-led perspective - the research is informed by debate within disability studies (particularly by a renowned theorist in the area Mike Oliver) as to issues in the potential exploitation of deaf and disabled subjects to the benefit of the researcher rather than the subjects themselves. The researcher will therefore provide a statement about her own ethical position on the website.

Modes of intervention in teaching and learning

The project proposal for *So What is Normal* began with problem of 'accessibility' as a concept for engaging with disability issues within architectural education or practice. As the work progressed, it has become increasingly clear that the implications of this issue need to be unravelled more carefully, not just through critical research into disability and architecture, but also in terms of needing to model how best (productively) to intervene into existing teaching and learning processes; and in considering how the work – and the researcher – is 'positioned' in relation to the contemporary politics of disability, diversity and disadvantage. This is because the *So What is Normal* research sits across 3 intersecting communities of practice:

• Academic researchers working in disability studies and related areas in cultural theory such as post-coloniality and feminism exploring conceptual frameworks for understanding aspects of society

• Architectural educators and students concerned with what is it to 'think' or 'act' like an architect

• Disability activists, particularly artists, campaigning to improve the quality of the built environment through creative practice

Whilst an approach to the first of these areas was outlined in the initial proposal, the last two needed further elucidation for the project to proceed productively, both to articulate how the online resources should to be designed and to 'locate' it ethically and politically (in the widest sense of that word). This section therefore explores how the project is envisaged as intervening in existing teaching and learning practices, whilst ethical issues are dealt with separately.

Many teaching and learning projects focus on the design and development of innovative methods and/or tools to enable the more productive teaching and learning of what is already in the curriculum, or is an adaptation from it. This project is different in that it starts from the premise that an aspect of architectural education (the impact of disability on architectural design) is inappropriately taught and thus needs the development and embedding of alternative methods and tools. This requires the examination of two related issues:

• What teaching and learning models underpin this research and how is the intended process of constructive intervention therefore framed?

• What procedures for enabling change (so that resources will be effectively embedded) are envisaged, and how do these impact on the design and dissemination of the resources themselves?

This project starts from an understanding of teaching and learning based on constructivist models – that is, it believes that learning happens through dialogic processes between tutor and student, student and student and student and object, particularly in how a student is enabled to 'talkback' their developing understanding of a subject. However, it is also interested in how these 'conversational' events accumulate through time and in a variety of contexts so as to successfully inculcate students into a particular discipline, both in how they think and in how they act.

Rather than being seen as obvious, comprehensive or consistent, this process of inculcation is understood as being uneven, contested and incorporating potential tensions for all its participants. This is both in terms of the bodies of knowledge of a subject, which are not fixed but constantly in flux as alternative approaches are negotiated (a process where education has a major, but also specialised role); and in terms of educational processes which contain implicit and explicit rules that must themselves be 'learnt' by tutors and students alike, but which can also be challenged, refused or misunderstood.

Thus, for both tutors and students, education is a transitional space or 'journey'. The process of learning is about moving from one 'way of being' to another, through exposure to a variety of, potentially contradictory, examples (embodied in tutor and peer interactions, teaching and learning methods, learning spaces, syllabi etc.,) about what that 'other way of being' constitutes[3]. This research has therefore also needed to consider what kind of space this transitional zone should be, in relation to the development of online resources, to most support effective teaching and learning for both tutor and student participants.

I would suggest that for tutors, this movement between 'what is already known' about a subject and 'what might be known' or 'could be known differently', is not so much a journey from one state to another (as for example, UG education frames it for students) but a means of contesting and finding resonant positionings within a subject discipline. Time constraints prevent this research from further examination of such an understanding or of the specific issues related to architectural and design education with its particular emphasis on creative transformation. Here, the key concern is how the *So What is Normal* resources might be productively offered to

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[3] This work is also informed by ideas of threshold concepts and 'troublesome knowledge' – see for example, Meyer and Land (eds) Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding Routledge 2006

architectural tutors and students, based on articulating education as a transitional zone. This led to three decisions.

First, as other CETLD projects have shown, much pedagogic theory is perceived by educators (at least in the design disciplines) as implying a lack – a failure amongst teachers to 'properly' teach their subject to students; and framed in language that is found alien by those tutors. As noted at the beginning of this report, a similar sense of being beleaguered is felt under the perceived pressure on designers from special interest groups such as the 'disabled'. Here, rather than offer the resources as a means of filling a gap, or dealing with an inadequacy, the aim was to make them appear intriguing, engaging, persuasive and even 'fashionable'.

Second, the focus was on developing resources which can be 'grasped' from the existing positions of architectural tutors and students. This suggests, (again as mentioned above) that social commitment and 'duty of care' becomes a central question, along with creativity, and that resources do not 'tell' tutors what to do but engage constructively with existing teaching and learning practices, that is, offer suggested adaptations or shifted points of reference to what tutors and students already know/do. It also means offering resources simultaneously at a variety of levels, not just in educational terms of 1st, 2nd, 3rd year, but also in different voices - from 'immediate' and 'commonsense' to 'intellectual' and theory-based arguments.

Third, unlike many existing materials on disability, accessibility and inclusive design, the resources do not provide general or technical-led 'solutions' but are open-ended. This is both to make them more attractive within the creative autonomy of design tutors, without telling them what to do; and to position disability resources in a way seen as more relevant to architectural education and practice - which centrally recognises itself as a process of transformation and questioning (problem-seeking) and therefore tends to teaching and learning methods and approaches which emphasise this.

The problem of generating a paradigm shift

One of the most frustrating aspects of the SWIN project has been in moving from shared agreement in discussion with architectural tutors to a concrete, shared project. Whilst staff at Queens University Belfast were interested in embedding inclusive pedagogies in their 09/10 curriculum, and were thus a potential partner for using/evaluating/adding to the SWIN resources, nothing has come of these negotiations. Whilst the initial evaluation (comments from disabled and Deaf artists) certainly showed some problems with the legibility of the site – particularly the cluttered amount of information in each section – I suggest here that the problem lies deeper. As I have already indicated, engagements with disability and architecture across UK post-compulsory education remain 'artificially' split between inclusive design enthusiasts and mainstream design tutors who do not make accessibility issues central to how they teach. Unfortunately, the enthusiastic experts already have an

understanding of disability and design which this project critiques, but which –because of its historical and cultural baggage – remains difficult to shift overnight. Meanwhile the mainstream of architectural design is also difficult to engage with, because they remain secure in their existing approaches and can only see disability as a 'special' case, to be dealt with occasionally, rather than something that might help constructively and creatively challenge current design theories and methods.

Whilst promotional materials were designed (posters and postcards to be circulated to all UK architectural schools), it was clear that this, of itself, would not enable the resources, or the research behind them, to make much of an impact.

In conclusion, it is therefore suggested that the process of inculcating change of this sort demands a much longer time-scale than this project was able to achieve; and that consideration of the mechanisms through which paradigm shifts of this sort can develop, needs to underpin the *So What is Normal?* development strategy.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE; CONTINUATION STRATEGY

> "The Panel felt this project was intellectually interesting and challenging and one of the best projects to come out of CETLD but expressed concerns with regard to how the website would be sustained. It was agreed that efforts should be made to try and embed it into the curriculum and links made to other websites, for example RIBA." (CETLD Project Review Group 09.06.09)

The processes of research, discussion and dissemination of *So What Is Normal?* show that the issues it raises around new ways of thinking, learning and practicing around architecture and disability is generating a large amount of interest. During the SWIN project Jos Boys has been invited to sit on the CABE Inclusive Design Group, the RIBA Inclusive Design Committee and RIBA Architects for Change. She has also been invited to meet with GLA Disability Officer David Morris. This, in turn, is offering opportunities for dissemination, collaboration and additional funding in partnership with organisations such as RIBA – which is planning 2010 as a Year of Diversity - the Helen Hamlyn Centre, CABE, the Architecture Centre Network (ACN) and the Greater London Assembly (GLA). However, the lead researcher's new employment has limited the time and opportunities to take these contacts forward.

Whilst the interim stage report suggested other possible spin-offs from the SWIN project (noted above), here was in important is to focus priorities on what next steps could make a difference to thinking about disability and architecture, especially in post-compulsory education. This requires both a

variety of means of shifting the paradigm, and a concentration of enabling and evaluating impact.

Within the academic field a conventional process of challenging and negotiating paradigms already exists, through both the publication of research texts, and the organization of events, networks and associated activities which 'spread the word'. The main output of this project has in fact been a considerable amount of original research re-thinking relationships between disability and architecture. Whilst this material exists in prototype form on the web, it could easily from the core of a book, aimed at the architectural/built environment/design student, tutor/practitioner (and potentially wider) market.

In addition, the ongoing links with Architecture-InsideOut offers examples of how a series of events - which draw in architects and others to work with disabled and Deaf artists – are slowly building up a momentum as those individuals begin to understand the implications of thinking differently on their creative practice and are passing this message onto others. This suggests the possibility of a Knowledge Transfer funding bid, preferably with Architecture-InsideOut as the non-university partner.

In conclusion, whilst this project is unfinished in terms of a proper evaluation of the prototype online resources developed; and unsuccessful in as much as it has failed to engage specific individuals or groups in considering these resources in their architectural teaching and learning; it *has* begun to provide "a very important 'bank' of information and debate with soft references to real life disability/deaf discourse in and around the built environment –: historical and present day" (Sarah Pickthall, external evaluator), in collaboration with disabled and Deaf people, which offers a firm foundation on which to build the next stages.

APPENDIX ONE

DESIGN

The Project

So What is Normal? aims to 'locate' disability differently. We ask, instead, how re-thinking the diversity of, and differences between people, can be generative, creative and enjoyable in the design process. For us disability is neither a special category nor a problem to be solved. Instead re-imagining (dis)abilities becomes a beginning, a means of exploring alternative and innovative approaches to learning and practicing design.

The SWIN website is an educational resource, offering diverse examples and different voices as to what such an attitude and approach to disability and architecture might mean. It is not our aim to tell practitioners, tutors or students what to do. Rather, we hope to open up debate and new possibilities; to share thinking, learning and designing from an alternative perspective; and to imagine a time when disability/diversity/difference is not a boring restraint on architecture, but radical, stylish and the coolest place to be - Jos Boys SWIN - originator

Disabled and Deaf people are now playing an important part in fuelling and informing ideas around what is 'normal', particularly when it comes to design and the built environment. It was always important that the developing resource SWIN had the disability and Deaf perspective and experience at its heart – including disabled people from across sectors: arts, culture, health, education and social commenting and contributing to its development – Sarah Pickthall – evaluator and contributor SWIN

'SWIN is about sharing thinking, learning and designing from an alternative perspective: a set of resources and perspectives for use in architectural training towards building a new aesthetic around disability, usability and access.'

http://www.sowhatisnormal.co.uk   SWIN has been developed over the last few years and has been subject to the usual development days when researching and compiling a rich and relevant resource holding archive: historical and contemporary within a necessarily accessible/usable web framework.

The site as it stands represents a very important 'bank' of information and debate with soft references to real life disability/deaf discourse in and around the built environment –: historical and present day.

The Evaluation

This evaluation seeks to explore whether SWIN is seen by disabled and Deaf people to be engaging and resourceful. This will in turn inform how the site might best be taken forward and used in educational and training settings to further a more inclusive environment in which we work and live and to provide an alternative to the dry, access audit framework that accessible design still inhabits.

The Website

The look and feel has been influenced, shaped by disabled/Deaf perspectives – holding architecturally relevant archive material and contemporary Disability Arts practice set within an architectural context with disabled commentary throughout. The site, developed by Surface Impression in Brighton is an extremely user friendly template, accessible to a wide range of disabled users

Website objectives:
  • Gather an archive of relevant architectural design and commentary reflecting disabled and Deaf people's historical and current day placement and relationship with and in the built environment
  • Present a resource to stimulate challenge and develop an alternative set of starting points for accessible design training of architects and planners
  • Provide a user friendly environment accessible to a wide range of users

<u>Results of the evaluation period May – August 2009</u>

20 individual disabled and Deaf people were sent a link to a survey monkey-questionnaire. With relatively a poor uptake up via this means, the evaluator went on to have a range of individual conversations – phone, msn and face to face to explore people's connection with and feelings about the developing resource and to enquire where people felt it important to focus and apply SWIN from here on in. Of those disabled and Deaf people asked

- o 2 of these – were connected with art and architecture colleges, institutes, either as practising and or visiting artists, tutors
- o 4 of these – maintained ongoing 'relationships' with art, architecture, planning and regeneration through other projects
- o 2 as practising and or trainee architect
- o 4 had little previous knowledge of disability art, architecture but experience of living with impairments and identifying as disabled people
- o 6 with a range of political awareness and engagement, ranging from politically savvy and active and others less so and/or disinterested in disability politics - of these 1 a paralympian, 1 working in social care,
- o 1 in deaf cultural studies,
- o 2 in museums, libraries and archives, one in regeneration etc – broad spectrum and
- o 2 in web journalism and
- o 2 younger disabled people at college – doing media studies.

The questions posed were very broad - asking for impressions, feelings, favourite site places, future development and predicted resourcefulness of the site.

In a few sentences, please share your first impression of SWIN with us?

- o *Busy, full – really informative and a nice place to dip into*
- o *Useful – this is very much needed – anything to get people to consider changing the built environment so everyone can use it*
- o *Doesn't automatically shriek disability – and the usual indignance and anger*
- o *Yes – great but no real indication as to what it's for. Is it for studies, for students?*

- *Very busy, quite crowded site. I like the focus areas though and the historical references are wonderful*

How did you find the look and feel moving through the site and did the content speak to you?

- *Transit through the site is relatively easy.*
- *I really liked the fact that we could see that some students and or groups of artists were actually doing 'alternative' approach projects already*
- *I thought it was great on 'Learning' that Architectural Studies had been questioned as to their approaches – there's a big difference between saying that you are delivering the right sort of training around inclusive environments and delivering a programme that addresses inclusive design effectively and changes the environment*
- *I liked the snippets – they were an interesting voice, but i wasn't quite sure what applied to what - as so many chunks on a page.*
- *Yes it spoke to me. But quite a lot of voices. Quite a lot going on, but so much of that is useful, it has to be said*
- *A thousand student projects leapt out at me!*
- I really liked the way the site made accessibility look appealing, interesting, sexy even..

What were your favourite section(s)on the site and why?

- *I really liked the Histories section – looking at how design was done 'to' disabled people, particularly within education and the history or incarceration*
- *I liked the deaf voice coming through around spatial, light – when it did it was good to see and it would be good to see more of this*
- *For me the Designing section proposing that 'other' as very beautiful. It struck a chord, it's about being really listened to, being included and influencing and changing*
- *Noticing was really lovely…*
- *I loved the Key Terms. It was serious but then with these little sardonic bites! Made me laugh out loud and refreshing in its take*
- *Slow Space – bring it on in Futures. i think, yes Futures. I thought this was really interesting and needs a whole focus on this alone.*
- *'Noticing' was subtle – really hit an unusual space around societal responsibility to pay more attention i.e. the impact of*

'conventional spatial and social practices' and the invisibility and 2nd rateness disabled people feel

What would you like to see more of?

- o *I'd like more projects visible really – a sense that people were changing things or could so through engaging with disability differently*
- o *I'd like to see how Architectural Schools use this resource and build it into what they do*
- o *Research – more examples of design that came out of /was driven by societal placement i.e. incarceration, special schooling*
- o *More projects – real examples of students actually looking at accessibility in a deeper way, beyond the boring old bolt on*
- o *More deaf voices – deaf space perspective – it would be good to seel more links*
- o *A sense of the different deaf, disability influences that have supported and developed the site*

What do you feel SWIN has to offer as an educational resource for design and architecture?

- o *Would like a sense that architectural training is buying into something like this and really using it with real developmental projects with real students*
- o *Would be a good resource for disabled artists to use to work with academia*
- o *Would be a shame if it stopped here. We need to mainstream it move it from where it sits as r&d really and make it 'live' 'used' and useful.*
- o *Would be an idea to develop projects from this – i think it's got so much going for it but it needs those delivering our environments to take note of it and take it on properly.*

Conclusion

Overall the evaluation of the site has been positive by a diversity of disabled and Deaf people. It is noted that it presents quite a glut of information at one sitting, sometimes a little difficult to decipher but made up for in its sometimes refreshingly engaging and provocative focus on quite contemporary cultural ideas of 'slow space', 'Deaf space' etc

From a disability/ Deaf perspective it is lauded for its departure from accessibility norms and reflects current departures led by disabled artists and those involved with architectural training who are exploring a different way of developing design that meets the diversity of all our lives and living and including disabled and Deaf people talking about what this really means in practice.

However it is important to note that as a standalone resource, those asked were clear that it will amount to nothing unless – it is

- used with real people responsible for architectural training and delivery
- has a weave of architects: comment and practice also woven through
- has a clear plan as to how it will be disseminated and to what ends – to guage interest, and broker uptake
- developed into resources: projects, actual delivery itself – disability led
- trialled within architectural training at different academic establishments through current and applied modular learning
- updated with examples within each section and made relevant for today

It would be favourable to develop its reach alongside a project such as http://www.architecture-insideout.co.uk providing a means and connection where those disabled and Deaf artists working in and around public realm and the built environment, might develop their skills with academia and training and be part of changing the way accessibility is understood and translated into places and spaces around us.

Sarah Pickthall
SWIN Evaluation 2009