

# ENFORCING NORMALCY

## EXAMINING THE SPATIALITY OF IMPAIRMENT IN THE CITY

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*We are prisoners of a grammar invented at an early stage of human evolution and it seems that, since we can think only by using language, our reason too is conditioned by the most primitive notions of reality!*

*-Frederick Nietzsche, A Will to Power*

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### Body Metaphors

Recent interest in anatomical analogies in architectural theory, where the urban intervention or insertion is likened to a "graft" or "interstice," has contributed significantly to the prevalence in contemporary architecture of an aesthetic of the "partially complete or deconstructed. The effect of the disemboweled spatial construct, with its laden clichés of Foucault's constricted/dislocated body-metaphors and Benjamin's concept of the city as phalanstery, has led to sometimes overwrought and self-conscious rhetorical tropes. These tend to rely heavily on visual/photogenic effects to convey an explicit formal complexity. Typically, these predominantly deconstructivist motifs claim to simulate, rather than mediate with, the contemporary situation of the city.

When viewed in the wider context of the dominance of so-called visual and verbal sound-bites in the commercial city, this pre-occupation with the consumptive potential of architecture, like packaging of fashionable and desirable products, has led to an ever increasing demand for vociferous or novel forms. These possess, almost as a rule, clearly intentioned motives to either reinforce or subvert established stereotypes, thereby emphasizing a perceived polarity between tradition and innovation. Such formal manipulations moreover tend to reduce the corporeality of space to either a fetish or a sterile void.

This obsession in the marketplace with the instantaneous or impulsive, in one's response to the fashionable architectural artifact, find parallel sentiments today in the incessant commercial preoccupation with the human body. Always conditioned by the public perception of human normality, the historical, albeit Renaissance, ideal of the body as an enduring calibration of a larger cosmic order unalterable by social or cultural change, experienced a profound rupture in the 18th century. Affected by the advent of scientism and the growing emancipation of the particular from the universal, of the individual psyche from the physical world, the body became the focus of systematic social, political and scientific experimentation. In short, the once harmonious

body/soul relationship succumbs to a collective libertarian will.

Perhaps the most explicit measure of this unfettered exploitation of the body in modern culture can be found in the glossy commercial image of the virile and youthful athletic form, with its obsessive attention to optimum visual and sensual effect. Like the photogenic image of the dynamic and narcissistic architectural construct, the semi-exposed body is designed to evoke sensations of desire and even of seduction. Whilst parading, moreover, as a product of fashion or the state-of-the-art, in both bodily gesture and dress, the currency of the body image like that of the rhetorical architectural intervention is often driven, at least initially, by established stereotypes and emasculated conventions.

Derived from the crisis that emerged in the Age of Enlightenment, the persistence of the classical belief in the absolutes of the body-metaphor in the modern age finds a new but disjointed dialogue, between archaeological excavation and anatomical dissection. As Barbara Maria Stafford observes, "... Piranesi captured immaterial motion, or impalpable transience, by resorting to palpable pokes tearing the epidermal veneer."<sup>2</sup> Here, the Renaissance notion of wholeness of the body/architecture analogy, as innately complete and indivisible, is subjected to a psychological and physical interrogation, where autopsy emerges as the principal analytical method for authenticating a culture.

At the same time, however, the culture of the 18th century also sought to embody an identity through the worship of historical heroes. Notions of normality were defined by exemplary and heroic acts or deeds, usually associated with intellectual, artistic or political attributes. Thus, general principles of an 'ideal' culture were drawn from the specifics of individually instigated events. In serving therefore to monumentalize and eternalize an age, by simultaneously paying homage to the individual hero/genius, and to archaeologically reconstitute a culture through the autopsy of fragment, architectural representation followed an almost schizophrenic path in the 18th century; its function seemed to deviate between the assembly and reordering of fragments (viz. Piranesi, Desiderio) and the creation of the indivisible and Platonically inspired object (viz. Boullée, Ledoux).

Put into this historical context, the virtual dominance today of scientific research as a predetermined framework for validating factual data, particularly in the field of



Fig. 1. *Blindness: Labyrinthine Entrapment - Metaphoric study by student Chris Smith.*



Fig. 2. *Blindness: Retracing the Journey - Orpheus and Sophrosyne, Narrative images by student Chris Smith.*

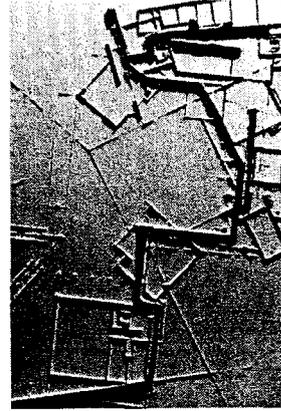


Fig. 3. *Blindness: Centre for Blind Awareness, Braille plan by student Chris Smith.*



Fig. 4. *Paraplegia: Urban Paralysis, Metaphoric study by student Jazz Kalirai.*

medicine, has increased our preoccupation with the notion of the super-human as a technologically rather than mythically instigated possibility. Human longevity and even the potential of immortality and facsimile have become rather more than contingent concerns, at least from the public perspective. Concomitantly, the emergence of anatomical/archaeological themes in contemporary architectural and cultural theory have precipitated a growing interest in hybrid or deconstructed forms. Taken beyond the immediate aesthetic effects of the palimpsest, some recent theories of Post-Modernity, particularly relating to Derridean notions of architecture as mask, have claimed analogical correlations between the excesses of some modern political ideologies, as typified in the authoritarian architectural monument, and human deformity. These often liken the irreconcilable and naive juxtapositions of modern eclecticism to a human "monster."<sup>3</sup>

It is curious that in spite of the interest in such themes in contemporary cultural and architectural theories, with their imbedded, but dislocated, body-metaphors, that the more general cultural and aesthetic significations of human disability with respect to the contemporary city have been overlooked or ignored. Whether the result of persistent social taboos or just disinterest, the corporeal and psychological affects of human impairment on the experience of urban space is potentially of great architectural importance; the denial of human senses or body-functions offer it could be argued a conceptual framework for investigating the spectrum of "altered" physiological responses to urban space, and the possibility that physical and psychological "compensations" actually intensify corporeal experience. Symptomatic, however, of this absent voice in architectural theory is the complex and controversial issue of the public perception of disability. Fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies, which are undoubtedly driven by deep-rooted prejudices and fear, the unquestioned assumption of the unambiguous meaning of the term conceals a cultural ambivalence

towards physical impairment. The association of human disability with social as well as physical abnormality is reasserted by the general perception of the conspicuous physical appearance of disability as a sign of denial of individual freedom, prompting pity or even revulsion. Such a belief is all the more significant when viewed in the general context of the obsessive aspirations of contemporary society towards boundless possibilities of expression.

Similar attitudes, one could argue, prevail in the experience of the contemporary city as a body of constituent parts, of planned or intentioned zones and unplanned interstitial territories. While the former is conceived as a product of controlling mechanisms, such as commercial determination, planning regulations and civic aspirations, the latter is often considered of peripheral concern to the productive life of the city, as if erased from memory. This dichotomy has, it seems, imbued a sense of corporate indifference, or even blindness, to the spatial and poetic qualities of much "hidden" or decaying urban tissue. The result in part of the preoccupation with the veneering of urban form, the backstreets of our cities have become at best contrived enclaves of so-called trendy sub-cultures or at worst no-go areas. Through the rhetoric of a univocal and temporally determined urban environment the historical and dialectical relationships between primary and secondary spaces, between collective and individual events, have gone into hibernation. As Paul Virilio points out, "If the Metropolis is still a place, a geographical site, it no longer has anything to do with the classical oppositions of city/country nor center/periphery."<sup>4</sup>

It is at this point that one must beg the question — is it possible to penetrate this defensive membrane of neutralized urban space by retracing the sensual experiences of the perambulatory body as a medium of discourse between the 'familiar' and the undiscovered or forgotten, between the venerated passage of the Headrow and its hidden peripheral spaces? By taking different modes of human impairment as a critical framework for



Fig. 5. *Paraplegia: Reclaiming the Headrow, Urban project by student Jazz Kalirai.*

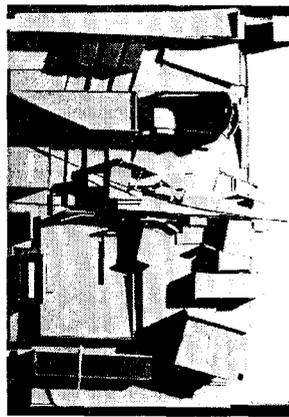


Fig. 6. *Paraplegia: Centre for Disability Awareness, Model by student Jazz Kalirai.*

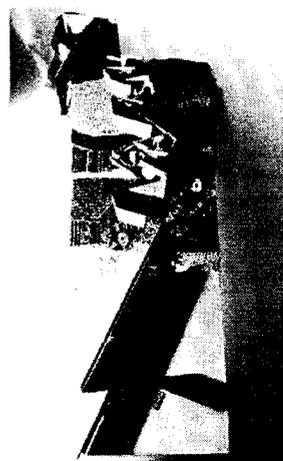


Fig. 7. *Respiratory disorders: Suffocating Domesticity, Study by student Viviana Comito.*



Fig. 8. *Respiratory disorders: Detail of metaphoric study by student Viviana Comito.*

investigating urban space, the sediments of that experience become focused and intensified, invoking the problematic relationship between the conspicuousness of physical disability and the invisibility of modern consciousness. Whether conceived subjectively as an autobiographical narrative, like Baudelaire's *flaneur*, or interpreted objectively as a visual mapping, the analogical relationship between human impairment and urban disjunctions have important spatial implications. This paper argues that the denial of senses or body-functions in human impairment does not necessarily restrict or limit experience *per se* but merely leads to a different set of experiences, in which perception is altered or appropriated, and even heightened. It is on the basis of this premise that this paper seeks to determine the possibility that human impairment can provide an exploratory medium for reinterpreting urban space.

### The Projects

This idea of urban deformity, or disfigurement, as generator of urban recovery formed the theoretical background to a design project for Graduate Diploma students at Leeds Metropolitan University. Disseminating from a study of the influence of different modes of human impairment on both the perception and representation of urban space, the project entailed three interconnected studies which can broadly be summarized as follows:

- 1) Modes of Perambulation: A Metaphoric Study into Human (Dis)ability.
- 2) The Interstices of Urban Tissue: Investigating the (Dis)connectivity of Passage.
- 3) A Centre for (Dis)ability Awareness

In the introductory project students were asked to take a form of human disability, for example blindness, and examine its particular corporeal and psychological impacts on the perception of urban space. Emphasis was placed on situating the investigation within a given context, whether real or fictive. By supporting their projects with background research material on social, medical and biographical evidence, students attempted

to trace or map the spatial and material coordinates of an impaired perambulatory body. In most cases students had the opportunity to directly consult disabled people, recording their experiences as one source for constructing a scenario.

This very specific and focused study was then followed by a large urban design project which explored a disjointed commercial/civic thoroughfare in Leeds, called the Headrow. As one of the principal streets in Leeds, the Headrow has recently suffered from a paralysis, both in its lateral disconnection to adjacent spaces and in its longitudinal discontinuity of urban activity. A product in part of a constantly shifting commercial centre, the rather contrived formality of the Headrow, in its axially and scale of buildings, was the result of an attempt during the first half of this century to create a formal civic passageway linking the monumental Victorian town hall to the west with the large residential developments to the east. Today, the street has become effectively fractured at identifiable road-junctions along its axis. These in turn define clearly delineated and unmediated territories of activity, from a large legal quarter along Westgate to a busy commercial zone adjacent to St. John's and Headrow shopping centers located about midway along the street. By taking the earlier studies of impairment as a critical model for navigating the street students were asked to conceive a series of interconnected 'events' from dance to drama, conditioned by the impairment itself and located within the peripheral spaces of the Headrow. By reinvigorating these forgotten territories with carefully inserted interventions, the continuity of the street itself could be established. Some of the more obvious analogies, furthermore, between human impairment and urban form, like spinal-paralysis, were found to provide highly appropriate metaphoric models in the analysis of the particular conditions of the Headrow.

The final project, to design a "Center for Disability Awareness," required students to choose a site, or sites, within the area of the Headrow, to conceive a series of mediating spaces that would provide accommodation for

a range of activities determined by the chosen disability, from sedentary spaces for quiet reflection to more dynamically conceived spaces for physical exertion. As the main project in the program, the idea of a building that seeks to respond to the particular physical and psychological conditions of a disability, drew on both the specificities of situation of the first study and the more general territorial investigations of the second. As if mediating between these two, the concept of the building was determined in part by thematically reconstructing the first project as a spatial mapping, connecting the perambulatory journey with the larger project of the urban interventions along the Headrow.

In mediating between the particularities of individual/biographical perceptions of urban space, through their corporeal/psychological affects, to the more general cultural and socio-political contexts of disability, this three-pronged investigation sought to determine the possibility of an architectural aesthetic of human impairment that is perceptible to *all*. Rather than reducing architecture's role, in the plight of the disabled, to simply the prosaic concerns of access alone, where urban space is predictably conceived as a constant obstacle to be overcome rather than as a unique and potentially meaningful experience, this exploratory study followed a phenomenological path in transgressing the simplistic boundaries between able and disable-bodied.

It is my belief that this study reveals the potential of

physical impairment as an empowering condition of human experience, rather than simply an impediment, in reengaging private ontologies with the distanced world of the contemporary city.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), p. 63.
- <sup>3</sup> A salient example is a paper presented by Doina Petrescu on the Palace of Ceausescu in Bucharest, at the conference *Beyond the Wall* in Bucharest, Romania, in July 1995.
- <sup>4</sup> Paul Virilio, 'The Overexposed City' in Neil Leach, *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 382.

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