


Carpenter Center

IN  
CONVERSATION

WANDA  
LIEBERMANN

AND DAVID  
SERLIN

for the Visual Arts



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Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts,  
Harvard University

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DAN BYERS : Hi, everyone. Welcome. I'm Dan Byers, the John R. and Barbara Robinson Family Director of the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts. Thank you so much for tuning in and joining us in the middle of your day, if you're on the East Coast of the U.S., that is. The organization and presentation of the Carpenter Center conversation series and publishing program that follows are a true team effort. I want to thank my colleagues, Sir Porte, Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant; Laura Preston, Administrative and Outreach Coordinator; and Gabby Banks, Gallery and Bookshop Attendant, for all of their amazing work on this series. Thank you. An important part of the series is the free edited transcripts that we publish after each of our conversation series. Please sign up to receive these in the mail at no cost.

A few notes for this afternoon's program. Closed captioning is provided by the National Captioning Institute, and you can access the captions by turning on the closed captions function in the Zoom controls at the bottom of your viewing screen or through the link shared in the

chat. All questions should be submitted through the Q&A function in the Zoom control bar, and the Q&A will begin at 3:00 p.m. and will be moderated by Sir Porte. Audience members can enhance their viewing experience during the screen share by changing your view to side by side while the presenters share their screen.

So today's program is a little different from the others in our series. Our conversation series has centered artists in conversation with scholars and curators, and this reflects the Carpenter Center's focus on living artists and commissioning new work. Yet, while we are an exhibition-focused, non-collecting institution, I always say that we do indeed have one collection object, and that is our very famous building. It was designed by Le Corbusier and built in 1963, and is one of the most important examples of modernist architecture in the United States. Along with our building manager and colleagues in Harvard's Office of Physical Resources and Planning [Faculty of Arts and Sciences], we are tasked with taking care of our building, and this will always be central to our work. Recently, though, we've been asking questions about how the building takes care of us and the many and diverse communities and bodies that use it. We're not a house museum or a historic site. We are a building that is used from early in the morning until late at night by students, staff, faculty, and visiting members of the public to work, teach, make art, visit exhibitions, attend events and film screenings, and to build and participate in community.

Despite its radical design and the aspirational ideals embedded in its architecture, the building does not take into account the diversity of bodies that use its space. This problem is not unique to the Carpenter Center but quite common for buildings of its age. And as we assess the ways we'd like the Carpenter Center to be more accessible to all in our community, we've invited scholars Wanda Liebermann and David Serlin to zoom out from our particular situation and consider some of modernist architecture's intersections with disability politics, as well as progressive approaches to modernism, historic preservation, and radical accessibility, that put these imperatives into animated, productive conversation. We're honored to have Wanda and David with us this afternoon.

WANDA LIEBERMANN : Hello. Thank you so much for attending today's conversation, and thank you to Dan Byers and to Sir Porte for inviting us and for arranging today's event. We really appreciate it. And we're looking forward to a lively discussion.

DAVID SERLIN : Yes, thanks to everyone for having us. Dan's observation that buildings care for us in the same ways that we should care for them is definitely going to be one of the themes that we will return to—so thank you for that, Dan. Thanks also to Sir for helping to organize and bring all this together. I'm going to put up my

share screen, so hopefully that will happen without any problems.

WL : Great! Thank you, David.

DS : Wanda and I have known each other for a long time, and what we would like to do today is take you through some ideas at the intersection of architectural history and disability history that we have been talking about for a long time, both on our own and with the amazing circle of colleagues to which we belong. Two questions that are going to animate our conversation today are, What do we mean by "historical preservation," and what do we mean by "inclusive architecture"? The word *inclusive* is itself a theme to which we will return throughout our joint presentation today.

WL : Yes, and we thought that we would start out by talking a little bit about architectural preservation and bringing it to the local in terms of the Carpenter Center. This is an area, Beacon Hill, which I think you all know quite well. This is one of two projects that I looked at where the intersection of the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Secretary of the Interior's preservation standards created particular tensions, which brings up a number of questions that reveal how situated and constructed the idea of preservation is, what we think of as authentic architectural heritage, and also what we think

inclusive design really means. So this is an example of the conflict that is actually still ongoing. It's been formally settled: the construction of these curb ramps in Beacon Hill has stalled, I believe.



Left: historical-style street lamp. Right: "objectionable" curb ramp design. Cambridge, MA. Photos courtesy of Wanda Liebermann.

The big question here was, What was authentic? How can a neighborhood that, like the Carpenter Center, is a space of everyday use be renovated? It's not like it's something off to the side, or even a novelty that one visits, but there are everyday activities with all different kinds of communities and bodies that are moving through this space. And so the conflicts here had to do with what is authentically historic to Beacon Hill and, in some ways, what trumps what? Is access and inclusion more important than what is considered authentic? And how is *authentic* defined? The next project also reveals this question because it also has to do with a historic building that is both beloved and in everyday use. This is the Board of Supervisors Chamber in San Francisco City Hall where, for a very long time, there was a big conflict over a very

small piece of architecture, namely, how to access the presidential dais.



Board of Supervisors Chamber, San Francisco City Hall. Photos courtesy of Wanda Liebermann.

Both cases raised questions about a couple of different things. One was, What is inclusive architecture? But also how should architecture, particularly historic building sites, represent inclusion and democratic ideals? Especially in these two cities, which view themselves as very progressive cities—ironically, given how long these controversies dragged on. What this slide shows—and I apologize, I had meant to do a bit more slide description—is a before-and-after photo of the wooden, paneled, heavily carved presidential dais. The original is on the left, and the "after" photo, once it had been made accessible, is on the right. One of the things that both of these projects revealed is that to *look* historical—in a way that isn't actually of the historic period but is made to look like it is—is more important to both of these communities than it is to create what Dolores Hayden would consider a layering of architectural eras and different

political movements, reflecting change over time and changing values in cities and societies over time.

DS : I would just add to Wanda's overview by underscoring how this particular historical neighborhood in Boston, and then this chamber within San Francisco's City Hall, are used both unconsciously and deliberately in many discussions about the relationship between public space and the ongoing democratic project. To ask what's "authentic" about these spaces or what elements should be retained or preserved goes beyond the scope of individual buildings or neighborhoods. Rather, we should ask questions both material and philosophical about how physical access relates to social and political access. For both of us, these examples underline the long-standing and fraught relationship between public architecture and the individual body. And, very often, the ways that architectural historians and architectural theorists have asserted the roots of this relationship have determined presumptively the ways we talk about access.

Take, for example, two famous representations of the body that remain highly influential among architectural educators: the one on the left is Leonardo da Vinci's *Vitruvian Man*, and the one on the right is *Le Modulor* by Le Corbusier, the man of the hour. Even though these are separated by 450 years or so, both of these representations have essential and implicit ideas embedded into them about what a normative version of the body looks

like. I don't just mean external characteristics like whiteness or masculinity but also in terms of the concept of an autonomous, able-bodied body that serves as a standard bearer for all bodies imagined by architects, which was as true in the Renaissance period and the high modernist period as it is today.

WL : I would add just one other thing that I think those figures or images do is that they become ways of, in fact, overlooking or ignoring the body, the situated body, the very body altogether. Because these images make us assume that the body is present, but in a way it's continually absented through these images that have become so ubiquitous in their meaning.

DS : Yes, by the time we get to the turn of the twentieth century, and especially after World War I with the emergence of the Bauhaus, the International Style, and other "modern" forms, we see more or less an extension of these representations of the body, even though the material designs for public and domestic architectures (and the material circumstances that inspired those designs) have begun to take an entirely different shape. Wanda, do you want to speak about these particular images?

WL : Well, I think one of the things that starts to happen, at the intersection of the body and modernist architecture, is that the body starts to be measured, and its

movements and gestures to be controlled and regulated and retrained. And spaces are shaped to fit this new, highly regulated, highly trained body.

DS : A perfect example of this is what are often called “galley kitchens,” based on their resemblance to kitchens aboard ships, that were once de rigueur in large-scale apartment complexes in order to promote particular kinds of domestic efficiency. Galley layouts follow industrial standards for how bodies are imagined to move in small or scaled-down spaces from one zone of activity or from one appliance to another. As Wanda says, these emerge in some kitchen designs in the 1920s. But after World War II—think of Le Corbusier’s *Unité d’Habitation* building in Marseille—the galley or micro kitchen is adopted by architects in many global cities, a modernist ethos intended to maximize interior space for domestic living, not domestic drudgery. This is itself a legacy carried over from the *Vitruvian Man* model of a normative body that can access tightly engineered spaces and move easily between them. In a way, apartment living in the mid-twentieth century is shorthand for talking about modes of urban efficiency shaped by normative expectations of how people should use everything from apartments to transportation hubs, corporate plazas, and public spaces.



1. Reformation of the Bauhaus kitchen at a Bauhaus Master's house. The focus of the illustration is a film strip to emphasize a focus on human studies of reformation, such as those in films and culture.



Left: filmstrip of stills from *Neues Wohnen* (*Haus Gropius*). Humboldt-Film GmbH, Berlin-Wilmersdorf, Jahr: 1926–28. Courtesy of Bauhaus-Archiv Berlin. Right: photo of the Frankfurt Kitchen prototype designed by the architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky for the Römerstadt Social Housing in Frankfurt, Germany, ca. 1926. Courtesy of the speakers.

WL : To build on what David is saying, the *Neufert* [Ernst Neufert, *Architects' Data*, originally published in 1936] in the European architectural scene and in the United States with *Architectural Graphic Standards* [Ramsey/Sleeper, originally published in 1932] reflect how World War II created opportunities, through military and other kinds of recruitment, to measure bodies. And these bodies become part of the standard repertoire of knowledge about what we call standard bodies but which, in fact, are very idealized types of bodies. This image shows a standard male figure and a female figure. But, as David knows, and many of you know, the female figure did not enter into the imaginary of Charles Ramsey and Harold Sleeper until many decades after the male figure did. And even then, its appearance represented what one might call a kind of niche standard. It's a diversification of a narrow range of

options of what the human body is and can do through these flattened-out, simplified ideas of the body.

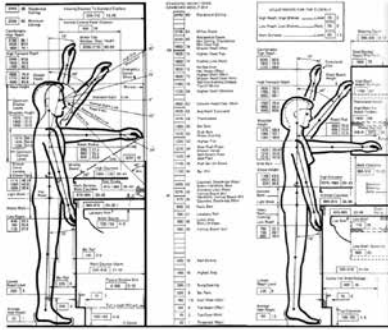


Diagram of "Anthropometric Data" from Charles Ramsey and Harold Sleeper, *Architectural Graphic Standards*, 1st and 12th eds. (New York: Wiley, 1932 and 2016). Courtesy of the speakers.

DS : Repetition of form is the result of the flattening and narrowing process Wanda is describing. Here is a photograph of one of the most iconic modernist buildings: Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, completed in the Paris suburb of Poissy between 1928 and 1931. It's interesting to think of this as a particular ideal for what was exported around the world as European-style modernism and its clear relationship to a place like the Carpenter Center, given the centrality of the ramps in both designs. The Carpenter Center's ramp carries forward the Villa Savoye's absorption of early twentieth-century languages of industrial activities like assembly-line production, while certain elements like painted metal balustrades come directly from ships, factories, and warehouses.

WL : There's also an argument that slants the conception of the house as a machine for living, in which the body is one more element in the machine in the sense that ramps allow for wheeled movement. And although that was not referencing what we now think of as the wheelchair ramp, it still attributed mechanistic qualities to the human body.

DS : Yes. So, for us, this tacit relationship between normative expectations of the modern body and normative expectations of modern architecture provides the ideal backdrop—or, perhaps, the perfect foil—for challenging standard accounts of the way that the body and modern architecture have been assumed merely to reflect or co-construct one another.

WL : I thought this was always an interesting image that I recall from my earliest architectural history survey courses of the modern era: Ebenezer Howard's famous—I guess you'd call it a kind of regional plan or site plan—of the Garden City of To-morrow. What I think is interesting is that this was part of a reform and utopian imagery of what a well-organized, humane, civilized, urban environment should be. And I had not noticed until I became a student of this topic [disability and design] that the convalescent homes and the asylums for the blind and deaf are scattered out beyond the central rail, among the forests and the cow pastures. And so, when we think about disability



history, one of the aspects is that modernity brought about not just the measuring of the body and classification of the body that we've already referenced but also a separation and creation of special places, special services, and special treatments for people who were considered non-normative in both mental and physical ways.

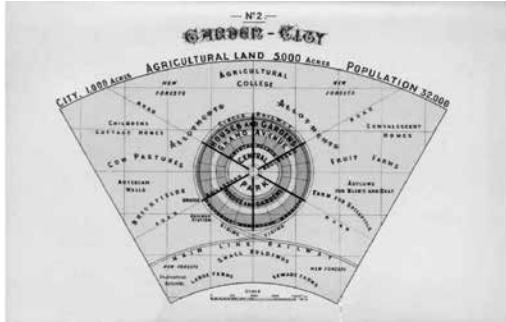


Diagram of Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd., 1898). Courtesy of the speakers.

DS : Right. Spatial exclusion, as shown on the Ebenezer Howard map, is galvanized by forms of institutional, educational, and social exclusion that might also be called somatic exclusion. So even in places like special workhouses, people with physical or sensory disabilities may be included in the modern idea of productivity, but they are still socially and spatially segregated from the rest of the population. Throughout the United States, Europe, the UK, Latin America, and other places that carry forward legacies of architectural modernism, you

will find examples of metropolitan regions that follow spatially and socially those ideals derived from Ebenezer Howard and his disciples about how populations should be organized.

WL : Just one addition: interestingly, for these kinds of workhouses, often very specific mathematical ratios of productivity of the disabled body, compared to the supposedly non-disabled body, were devised in order to qualify to work in these spaces. And that emerges in a project that I will talk about later on as well, which gives away some of its older roots.

DS : Yes. None of the things we're talking about today—questions about what's authentic or not, what is inclusive or exclusive—come out of nowhere. They have deep roots.

As Dan mentioned, I am a fellow at the American Academy in Rome this year, and I'm here studying a building complex called the Progetto Ophelia, a mental asylum in Potenza, Italy, designed in 1905 by Marcello Piacentini. Many of the buildings on the original site are still extant, though they have been transformed into apartments and private houses. You may recognize Piacentini's name from Italian architectural history; two decades later, after the Progetto Ophelia, he became Mussolini's right-hand man—the Albert Speer of fascist Italy, as it were.



Diagram of Il Progetto Ophelia (the Ophelia Project), a psychiatric asylum in Potenza, Italy, designed by the architect Marcello Piacentini in 1905. Courtesy of the speakers.

What initially drew me to the site is very much what Wanda and I are trying to describe with regard to spatial segregation. Piacentini's asylum was deliberately located outside the city center, and even within the asylum, patients were assigned to their own building depending on their diagnosis or condition. But this turns out to be one of the things that makes Piacentini's design unique: unlike typical asylum architecture in which all patients are gathered in one single building, or "total institution," Piacentini created a campus-like environment of buildings connected by walkways and gardens. It was a kind of transition between older asylum models and something new, as one might see in contemporary projects by Viennese architects like Josef Hoffmann and Otto Wagner. Unfortunately, the asylum only lasted a short time, and by the early 1930s, it had been adapted and absorbed into Mussolini's vision of an administrative fascist state.

WL : David, based on what you've told me, one of the things that's really interesting about that project is that

it went outside of some of the typical things we think about as treatment in that it provided all these different, interesting sensory—I don't know if you want to call them therapies—but environments in order to soothe or to help people recover. And so, already, there is an element of something more contemporary and more thoughtful—and not, as you say, the "total institution"—around that.

DS : I was going to mention those aspects a little bit later on, but I can talk about them now. They're why I'm here in Italy! Piacentini's original plan for the site incorporated ideas from Freudian psychoanalysis as spatialized and materialized through what might be called sensory-based design. For example, the building on the far left of the asylum campus was assigned to patients who were classified as *agitati* and *furiosi*—you can probably put together what those appellations mean. Although the building was the most spatially segregated, it was surrounded by numerous gardens and garden paths filled with a variety of plants and flowers. The building also featured corridors used therapeutically to bring light, air, sound, and smell to patients, with the intention of triggering certain kinds of sensory or cognitive associations to perhaps make the *agitati* and *furiosi* less so. It was an architectural approach to care for non-normative, stigmatized, and abused populations that was many decades ahead of its time in terms of its uses of space to produce different kinds of salutary effects—nearly a quarter century

before Alvar Aalto's celebrated design for a tuberculosis sanitarium in Paimio, Finland. That's what makes the Piacentini site such an interesting one.

For the time being, however, I want to circle back to some other examples of early twentieth-century modern architecture designed with particular non-normative populations in mind. The Charles Boettcher School for Crippled Children, which opened in Denver, Colorado, in 1938, was an unprecedented work of architectural empathy, designed by the regional architect Burnham Hoyt and with building costs shared by local philanthropist Boettcher and the Works Progress Administration, the New Deal public works agency. Unfortunately, the Boettcher School was demolished in 1993; but what makes it a remarkable building still worth talking about is that Hoyt, clearly a follower of European modernists like Le Corbusier, wanted to bring some of that sensibility to an educational institution for children with mobility impairments or other physical disabilities. His central innovation was to replace staircases with ramps. In these photos, taken in 1992, you can see the dual ramps with "up" and "down" lanes that flow in opposite directions at the same time. Clearly, the ramps functioned as access tools to enable students to go from one floor to another with relative ease; but in making these the central ramps for *all* users, Hoyt leveled the playing field, so to speak, so that all occupants of the building shared the same space. This architectural message of inclusion, this

democratization of space, was certainly unheard of in the 1930s, especially in a public institution.



Photos of the central ramp in the Boettcher School for Crippled Children, Denver County, CO, 1992. Courtesy of Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record/Historic American Landscapes Survey. Photo: Roger Whitacre.

WL : It's interesting how the architectural vocabulary of the ramp as a sloped plane with these thin metal tubings becomes a really iconic, modernist, Corbusian architecture, regardless of the intended user.

DS : Right. And this vocabulary gets carried forward with so many of the examples that we will talk about before we get to the Carpenter Center—the birthday boy, as it were. Here is an important one that is still relatively unknown beyond certain spheres: the Kenneth and Phyllis Laurent House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in the late 1940s and built in 1951. It was not until surviving family members put the house on the market about a decade

ago that it was “rediscovered,” landmarked, and turned into a museum. Since Kenneth Laurent used a wheelchair, the house offers an expanded Wrightian vocabulary of built-ins and ready-mades, including lowered cabinets and surfaces and accessible bathing and toileting features, that enabled Laurent to move easily from one space to another. In the master bedroom, Wright installed a floating wood desk that one could wheel up to, which was also true of the vanity in another bedroom. Its open floor plan, adapted from one of Wright’s Usonian houses, resembles that of a ranch-style house. Yet knowing that it was deliberately designed for Laurent decades before such features became more widely available to people with disabilities, and surely before they would become mandated or expected, provides an interesting point of departure for those who seek to tell a more nuanced history of architectural modernism. Which takes us to Het Dorp. Wanda?

WL : It’s interesting to see these other examples in relationship to Het Dorp, a “village” in the Netherlands designed by Jaap Bakema in the 1960s for people with disabilities. Like the other projects, particularly the Boettcher School and the Italian project, these are all mixed. On the one hand, they are novel and thoughtful in that they even address and think carefully about the disabled body. But in many respects, they also rehash some existing values about the place for disabled people. The most remarkable thing that’s different about Het

Dorp from some of the previous projects is that it was very consciously a project of citizenship-making of people with disabilities. It emerged in the early sixties around the time that the Dutch welfare state was developing and expanding. And so the inclusion of people with disabilities, even though this was a private, charitable project, really involved the entire public and generated an enormous amount of mass-hysterical public interest in this project. People contributed to it and participated; the entire nation felt it was participating in making it.

One of the remarkable things is that its founders wrote a constitution for the citizens who would live there. And the idea was that the architecture itself was like a prosthetic that would make “normal,” would normalize, and create “regular citizens” out of people who had formerly not had public recognition. One thing that you can see from the photograph on the right, and some of the earlier images, that we move through in the section elevations, is that unlike the other projects that used architectural ramps, the site itself was very steeply sloped, and the architecture was organized in relationship to the slope so that every floor was a ground floor. That was one of the themes of Bakema’s architecture. He was a well-known leader of a movement within mainstream architectural modernism that broke out and wanted to make architecture that was more receptive to “human associations”—one of his terms—for creating an open society. So the inclusion of people with disabilities



Van den Broek and Bakema, Het Dorp, Arnhem, Netherlands, 1963–65, perspective view from the southwest. Pictured in Wanda Liebermann, “Humanizing Modernism? Jaap Bakema’s Het Dorp, a Village for Disabled Citizens,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (JSAH)* 75, no. 2 (2016): 158–81.

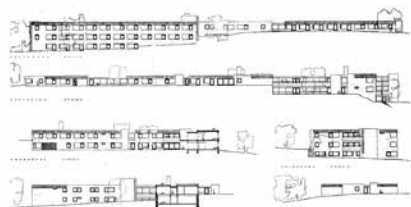


Illustration by Van den Broek and Bakema, Het Dorp, Arnhem, Netherlands, 1963–65, section elevations of building phase 4. Pictured in Liebermann, “Humanizing Modernism?”



Photo of Van den Broek and Bakema, Het Dorp, Arnhem, Netherlands, 1963–65, Jachtweg (Hunt Way), the first completed floor. Pictured in Liebermann, “Humanizing Modernism?”

through very specific architectural interventions was certainly about the micro, the body scale, but there was also this macro, society-wide idea of expanding what architecture could do, what its civic role was. And so, in a way, it was both a physical and a civic prosthetic.

This image is a perfect example, because Het Dorp’s hallways were called “streets.” That remains to this day. This place is still very much in use, and millions of bricks were donated as part of the launching telethon that raised awareness of this project. And so the bricks, a ubiquitous Dutch building material, were used to create a kind of indoor city.

On the left is an image that was prevalent in one of the many television broadcasts that continued to be made years after the opening of Het Dorp that showed how all these micro architectures were specifically customized to people—again largely for wheelchair users. This film still also emphasizes a heteronormative, gender-normative consumer; what you don’t see here is that the scene that precedes this in the television broadcast shows this Het Dorp resident in a store in downtown Arnhem, selecting and purchasing a lipstick.

Here is a photo of Het Dorp today—well, recently—which is still in use. An interesting aspect was that the people who envisioned Het Dorp understood the small commercial zone shown here as a buffer between disabled and non-disabled people, and they made a comparison with the integration that was happening at the time

in the United States between African American communities and white communities. So they were saying that there needed to be an adjustment space or an adjustment period for people to accept people with disabilities in day-to-day life. And that's what this small commercial zone is. It turned out to be a failure. It was not self-supporting financially, as had been planned. Het Dorp has since become much more of a standard institution, but there were a number of really hi-tech and low-tech innovations in this space, not to mention that it really challenged and changed society's understanding of the place of people with disabilities in the Dutch mainstream.

DS : What Wanda is describing in terms of the vision of Het Dorp as pushing at conventional ideas about what planning might look like—either in the early 1960s or even now—leads us to an important distinction. We want to emphasize the difference between architectural innovations intended to neutralize spaces in order to bring people with disabilities “up” to some consensual plateau of normativity, and architectural innovations intended to approach space differently by using the physical or cognitive experiences of people with disabilities rather than trying to neutralize them. The latter approach is something that Wanda and I, and many of our colleagues in disability studies, have been advocating for in terms of present and future design. We want to challenge those aspects of architecture that work

to create inclusion or accommodation but which leave designs fundamentally intact.



Drawing of “A Piano for Invalids,” originally published in *Scientific American* (New York: Springer Nature, 1899).

Some of the examples we want to share with you are ones that long predate the modernist interventions that we're talking about. Here, for example, is an engraving from *Scientific American*, published in 1899, of a woman—who, in the parlance of the time, was an “invalid” who was “confined” to her bed—playing the keys of an upright piano that has been tilted ninety degrees and installed vertically on legs. The innovation here is not a formal reinvention of the piano per se; the keyboard remains at the same ninety-degree angle to the user. The innovation is that it takes the frame of the piano, an otherwise horizontal object, and flips it in order to make it accessible to someone in bed. This innovation not only builds upon the user's desire for physical access to an object, it also aligns with a user's sensuous relationship to an object. This image is a powerful reminder that not all architectural or technological projects are focused on facilitating access for mobility or movement. There are also ways to



think about facilitating access for sensory and haptic and cognitive pleasures that account for the diverse experiences that people have in space.

An example from my recent work that I sometimes draw upon to make this point is the Illinois Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, designed by Stanley Tigerman, which opened in Chicago in 1978. The building was sold off and converted into a bank about a dozen years ago. During its heyday, however, it served as a local library and a distribution center for Braille books and books on tape for patrons with visual impairments. But it also was designed to facilitate access for people like the man in this photograph, a patron in a wheelchair using the library's main reference desk. Tigerman consistently used the somatic experiences of physical and visual impairment as design inspirations throughout the library. In his original plan, the children's area in the library included play spaces with secret tunnels that were specifically designed for kids who wanted to read a Braille book on their own away from the "prying eyes" of teachers and parents. Tigerman wanted to give them the spatial experiences of escape and mischief, architectural rewards typically only associated with non-disabled users.

WL : I think one of the things we're getting at with that last project is moving away from thinking about just mobility, accessibility, as well as moving beyond compliance-based design. Although the ADA is very important, it

also has a number of limitations and problems associated with it. And so we are thinking about design and projects that think more expansively, more creatively about bodies that are non-normative, that have different kinds of disabilities, and use that as inspiration.



Photo of red spiral staircase in the Ed Roberts Campus, Berkeley, CA. Designed by Leddy Maytum Stacy Architects, 2010. Photo: Tom Griffith.

This is the Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley, which is noticeably different from some of the previous projects by being situated squarely in the middle of a community, as opposed to being separated. And, in fact, it was made possible financially by being linked to the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] line, the BART station. That made it a TOD, a transit-oriented development, which provided

the lion's share of funding for this project. The TOD was a very important element in thinking about making the Ed Roberts Campus a hub at both a national and international level. Here again, the ramp figures importantly as a form of circulation, but it also becomes a symbol for accessibility and of Universal Design. Universal Design is a term that many of you may know, which is to think about designing for the widest possibility of user and uses, rather than thinking about the more prescriptive technical guidance that's given through the ADA-based building code.

DS : To build upon some of these ideas, it's important to reckon with the role that the Ed Roberts Campus plays as part of the infrastructure that connects all users to the Bay Area. You need to move through that station if you want to ride on BART. It's the best type of civic inclusion. And it's articulated through what we see in this photograph. On the right are the architects Bill Leddy and Dmitri Belzer; and on the left, wearing orange construction hats, are members of Berkeley's very politicized and visionary disability rights community, a community still very much emboldened by the disability rights movements of the 1960s and '70s, who served as consultants or provided feedback. In other words, there was an opportunity here to include people in the design process and to have conversations about it so that they are not just the imagined beneficiaries of conversations that take place behind the closed doors of city administrators and design firms.

This is no longer Ebenezer Howard's model of spatial segregation that puts "our" people over here and "everybody else" over there. This is a bold and forward-thinking project that refutes the notion of people with disabilities as a subset of the general population. Instead, it starts from the basic premise that people with disabilities are already civic stakeholders who use these services as members of the broader Bay Area culture.

WL : I think what we can say about that project and this project is that the distinction is that people with disabilities are the client, not just stakeholders or consultants. And so the most innovative projects are still happening when people with disabilities control the funding of the project. Here in the Lighthouse for the Blind, you see Katy Hawkins of Mark Cavagnero Associates, the project architect, and also Chris Downey and Arup representatives. Their participation entails a much more complex design process for practicing architects. And anyone out there who is thinking about architecture as a practice, these kinds of projects change how architecture is practiced in a number of ways, because the design process has to expand outward to include voices and experiences, and even new methods. This includes conversation, mock-ups, and testing procedures that are beyond what anyone ever does, certainly in design studio education but also for a typical office project. And it also leads to developing different visual or other means to represent



spatial information, as that Braille or tactile plan on the right shows.

DS : For this particular population, the centrality of the tactile, as opposed to the visual, is an irreducible feature of what it is that they need.

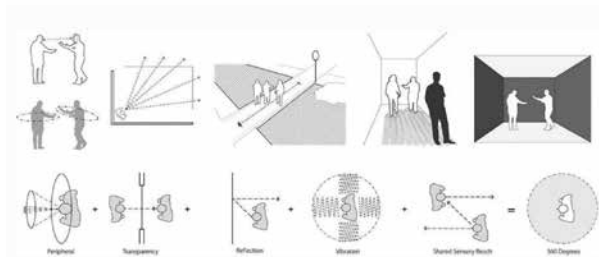
WL : There are also some design ideas related to light and visual contrast and things like that. People with visual impairments often are not fully blind, so light is not unimportant. But there was also a focus on acoustical experiences. As an architecture studio instructor, I often ask students to think beyond the visual and formal. These projects are really good examples of thinking through the other dimensions, the experiential dimensions of architectural design.

DS : The visual always leads the way that architects are professionally trained to think. But with some of these examples that Wanda has brought in, we have non-visually oriented devices or fixtures that offer a counter-argument against the privilege of the visual by highlighting sensory design elements that usually are either ignored or else treated only as aesthetic. For people without a visual impairment, the choice of particular kinds of materials may only be a choice related to design philosophy or dictated by cost. But for people for whom textured materials provide haptic feedback, or for

whom predictable patterns and spatial arrangements serve as navigation devices, materials can be more than aesthetic. They can make possible reliable, repeatable experiences that engage all the senses. And these can be absorbed into architectural practice and architectural education, not only for people with visual impairments but for people across the board.

WL : The last project we'll look at before moving on to the Carpenter Center itself is the James Lee Sorenson Language and Communication Center [SLCC] at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC. What is really interesting about this project—and a little bit the last project, too—is that they might fall into a category of post-Universal Design. Universal Design has been criticized for rhetorically flattening out all kinds of embodiment and saying we should do this because *everyone* benefits. By contrast, these projects deliberately focus on a very specific form of moving through the world, living in the world, in this case, the very dynamic, embodied, and visual form of American Sign Language. ASL has created a vocabulary of techniques or ideas called DeafSpace [DSP], which some of you may have heard of. DeafSpace has been developed by the architecture team at Gallaudet University, including Hansel Bauman. Rather than saying, “Oh, this works for everyone,” as Universal Design does, the Sorensen Center responds to what people who use ASL need in order to be able to communicate

with each other, to not lose touch with each other, and understand each other when they're moving through space or sitting in space or getting lessons and having lectures and other things like that. There is a real focus on somatic specificity, a springboard for thinking about what David was talking about, which is what are the other senses? What are the other kinetic qualities, dynamics, that one can think about to inspire design ideas and spatial forms?



Concept designs depicting design elements that consider the five major touch points between deaf experiences and the built environment, by DeafSpace Project of Gallaudet University, Washington, DC. Courtesy of DeafSpace.

DS : Which brings us to the building that has inspired our conversation today. Wanda and I want to conclude the visual portion of our presentation with some images of the Carpenter Center. We thought it would be helpful for people who don't know the building or the area of

the Harvard campus in which it's situated, and who are engaging with it perhaps for the first time. Here is the Carpenter Center in 1963 when it opened, and here it is today. Throughout our presentation, we've referenced the ramp that arguably forms the building's central design element. We'll leave these images up on the screen as we move our conversation to the subject at hand.

WL : What's interesting about this project, and the question around what the future of the Carpenter Center will be as a kind of physical and social space, brings us full circle to our earliest question: What does historic architectural preservation mean? On the one hand, it often means keeping the physical fabric intact as it was originally. But often that doesn't solve a lot of the contemporary problems or challenges to be inclusive. And so then, in a case like Le Corbusier, where the architecture really was a radical break from the past, and it was a rethinking about embodiment at the time in a number of ways, adapting this building could be more in the spirit of Le Corbusier if those approaches were translated a half century into the future. One could think about ways in which new interventions in this building could create similarly challenging questions about embodiment, about the flow of space, about sensory opportunities that have been raised by some of the previous questions. I think that obviously is going to be a big debate that the people who will be charged with thinking about this will engage in.

DS : Wanda, I think what you're drawing attention to is that when we talk about "historic preservation," what exactly is it that we are preserving, either historically or materially? The phrase conjures a very particular constellation of ideas about what we value, whether it's preserving older buildings within urban renewal schemes, or whose architectural work should get saved and why, or how and why we value particular objects from the past but not others. At the same time, implicit within the phrase is a set of able-bodied assumptions about *whose* histories are being preserved and *which* embodied experiences of space will be carried forward—and which will be sidelined or ignored. So I like this idea that, in thinking about the preservation/renovation of an important building like the Carpenter Center, we are ultimately trying to foreground a question that is both philosophical as well as practical: What is it that we want to preserve as we move forward?

WL : Right. And to me, an approach that allows for a more interesting, critical rethinking would be to return to what the original ideas were at that time, and what was challenging about this building at that time, because it's surrounded by rather traditional brick boxes on Quincy Street. So, the question really is how would one take that kind of ethos and reinterpret it with today's thinking, with today's challenges, and today's opportunities.

DS : Wanda, should we open it up to questions? I'm sure there are folks who want to ask not only about some of the things we've said about the Carpenter Center but maybe some of the other historical or theoretical or conceptual points that we made. Should I take us out of the screen share and go to a gallery view?

WL : I think that would be fine. I believe Sir might be moderating the chats.

SIR PORTE : Hello, yes. Thank you, David, for taking us out of the screen-sharing function. Let me introduce myself to everybody in our Zoom room. My name is Sir. My pronouns are they, them, or Sir. I'm the Carpenter Center's Curatorial and Public Programs Assistant, and deeply appreciative to Wanda and David for walking us through those different examples of historically accessible buildings or those that are attempting to reach that point, and the other sensory conditions to consider as we think about accessible design. That definitely was a huge teaching moment for me.

So there's one question in the Q&A that I will read out anonymously, and to those who are attending, feel free to share additional questions that you may have. Our first question to consider is, Do the disabled benefit from the preservation of buildings without access facilities?

DS : That's a very interesting question. I guess one might ask, and this is not to avoid the question, but what do we mean by "benefit"? If a primary goal of a site is to provide access, and that goal is not achieved, is the site a failure—not just a social or architectural failure but a failure of the imagination? For instance, there are numerous examples of historical sites, especially in Europe but also in the United States, that are "grandfathered" under certain policies where it has been shown that to provide a ramp or an elevator would compromise a building's structural integrity, therefore limiting certain access interventions for the sake of preservation. Now, I'm not advocating that as a kind of final position. I'm just sharing that there are lots of places in the world where those kinds of statements have been put forward. So then we have to ask, What does it benefit for some to be able to gain access—think of a site, for instance, like Sacré-Coeur in Paris, which sits perched atop a steep hill—if it also means accepting that some people will not be able to gain access? If we were to undertake a major restoration of a site, should it change our cost-benefit analysis if we have to admit that it will be accessible to some but not to all? Or is that simply unacceptable thinking in 2021, a failure to take seriously the political imperative of accessibility? I don't have the answer to that. It's more that these are the kinds of questions that are really worth asking when we talk about inclusive architecture and historic preservation.

WL : This is a really interesting question, and it connects directly to one of the first projects we showed, San Francisco City Hall. Obviously, like any community, the disability community is not monolithic. So opinions may vary, but the official, shall we say, access advocacy opinion in San Francisco was that the [Board of Supervisors Presidential] dais actually needed to be made accessible to wheelchair users. It could not be ruled a relic and cordoned off with a velvet rope, as it had been done for many years, as a way to sidestep the issue. There was a real insistence that these spaces not just remain unused but that, from a historic and democratic standpoint, we need to actually demonstrate that buildings and spaces that are in everyday use are also in everyday use by people with disabilities. So that there is a kind of symbolic representation of inclusion and not parts of the building that remain off limits for people with disabilities. Of course, not every building is a City Hall, with the legislative core of San Francisco, so not all buildings have the same political or symbolic prominence as this building. But in this building—and also in the federal Congress—ramps were eventually built so that politicians with disabilities could participate in the full range of legislative, democracy-making activities.

I think the question is probably always somewhat contextual. The comment that David made, that the fabric itself was too rare or too irreplaceable or too technically complex, was the argument used for over a decade to avoid making San Francisco City Hall accessible. So I

think that always is raised. And in some ways, the more interesting challenge for that project, as well as the Carpenter Center, is how can we rethink what preservation means so that access and these historic buildings can still work together. And that may not always be ADA compliant. Maybe there need to be more creative, more outside-the-box solutions. I think it's a more interesting design challenge to ask how can we imagine them being as physically accessible as possible.

DS : I would only add, and I hope both Wanda and I have communicated this today, that one of the recurring messages of urban planning in European and U.S. cities from the mid-nineteenth century to the present is that if you are a person with disabilities, or a person who is stigmatized or pathologized in some way, then these spaces were not designed or intended for people like you. Susan Schweik's important book *The Ugly Laws* is focused precisely on this message as a guiding principle of municipal governance. For much of the twentieth century, the same message was communicated explicitly in the segregation of toilets and water fountains and bus stations and schools for people of color. And that message has returned in discussions around which bodies get to use which public bathrooms, and on what basis such determinations are made.

By advocating for access and inclusion through preservation policy and architectural design, we uphold

a democratic vision of what we want our cities to look like. These are ongoing challenges that remain as vital and unresolved for people with disabilities as they are for queer people, people of color, immigrants, homeless people, and anyone to whom the message "this space isn't for you" has been historically communicated. I would only add that they are material challenges for people with disabilities in a way that is distinct from the kinds of challenges faced by people who occupy other minoritarian or non-normative identities.

WL : I just want to add briefly that David's point speaks to the decisions that are made architecturally and aesthetically, and what strategies are used to create accessibility to buildings. One way of thinking is about the urban as a kind of public history where successive liberation movements, or even just successive eras of what democracy has meant at that time, are made visible. Another approach, taken by the two cases that were shown at the beginning, is aimed at obscuring successive historical truths and instead make it look like inclusion had always been there. And that was a very important political stance. This dichotomy reflects an evolving discussion about how we architecturally signal inclusion: whether the architecture discloses that people with disabilities came later into the civic realm and we're okay with recognizing that we have not always been this inclusive—or whether inclusion should look stylistically, physically, like

it was always built into the environment. Those are not resolved debates and will probably be issues that will come up for the Carpenter Center at some point.

DS : Yes, indeed.

SP : I want to echo one comment submitted through our Q&A: “Thank you for the stimulating answers. You’ve offered a lot to digest and consider. Do you mind sharing a few examples of important modernist architecture that have been adapted to become more accessible?” This was submitted through our chat.

WL : That’s a really interesting question. I’m trying to think about well-known modernist buildings that I have intimate knowledge of, because this question requires that one have either studied or explored specific buildings. I’m thinking about Wurster Hall, home of the College of Environmental Design, a Brutalist building, on the UC Berkeley campus. It was not built with access in mind, although it does have a kind of at-grade entrance. But its original entrance is on the east side and has this cascading stair, and I don’t know if that’s why it was ultimately abandoned as its main entrance. Remodels are made all the time of buildings from all kinds of eras to give them enlarged or differently configured bathrooms—and auditoriums have ramps installed—but I’m trying to think of an example. David, you actually have, well, it’s not a modernist

building, but I was thinking about the Victoria and Albert Museum; that has a very contemporary, beautiful ramp, but the building itself is not a modernist building.

DS : In 2017, the London firm Amanda Levete Architects unveiled its new entrance and courtyard at the Victoria and Albert Museum on the Exhibition Road side of the museum. It is a great example of inclusive design because the idea behind it was not to create a visible difference between, say, “non-disabled” stairs and a “disabled” ramp. Instead, from the sidewalk, one experiences a continuous slope downward at a very gentle decline that concludes at a set of terraced amphitheater steps for outdoor lectures or lunchtime concerts. And all of this was inserted into what was essentially an austere Victorian courtyard. Levete’s intervention provides a great example for how to avoid simply grafting a ramp or elevator onto a building, which unfortunately a lot of architects do in order to be compliant. Instead of merely meeting compliance, however, here is a redesign that neutralizes the distinction between “disabled” and “non-disabled” and provides equal-opportunity access for everyone without ever calling attention to itself.

WL : That’s a beautiful example. I urge everyone to look that project up. But the question asks about modernist architecture, something from the 1920s or ’30s onward, and I’m racking my brain a little bit. One of the interesting

things about buildings of the sixties and seventies—again, I'm thinking largely of the Harvard campus, the Lluís Sert buildings, the Holyoke Center, but also Gund Hall [Graduate School of Design] right down the street from the Carpenter Center—is that there was a design philosophy of having the outside road come into the inside. And so the brick ground paving continues into the interior. They do end up having no-step entrances. So they were inadvertently accessible, but often the rest of those buildings are not—or not as accessible. That was not consciously in mind, necessarily.

DS : I can't think of one offhand. But I will say this: I have finally made my peace with Brutalism. And for this reason only: a lot of Brutalist buildings are infinitely more accessible than their modernist precursors because of the Brutalist vocabulary that includes plazas, platforms, towers, and other large-scale structures that gesture toward, if not outright mimic, monumentalist forms. If you are someone who uses a wheelchair, or who uses a white cane or service animal, it is much easier to navigate a Brutalist space than a conventional modernist one simply because of the differences of scale between buildings and humans. In fact, the so-called inhuman scale of Brutalist architecture allows many more opportunities for making retrospective access possible than the small, often boutique spaces identified with early modernist design. A disability approach to architecture imagines human needs differently. So the

critique of Brutalism's inhumanity, it turns out, has a very fixed notion of humanity in mind. This is why I think Le Corbusier's unbuilt plan for the Ville Radieuse [Radiant City], often critiqued as the height of modernism's more inhumane impulses, may have been more of a model for future disability architecture forms than his Villa Savoye.

WL : I completely agree. And the question from the audience member makes me think I'm remiss and need to look up what has been done to some iconic modernist buildings. And in some ways, that would probably be a kind of precedent assignment—that anyone undertaking changes to any building, including the Carpenter Center, should do some research on that.

DS : As we move through pandemic time and slowly return to whatever "normal" is, it's worth remembering that some modernist sites, such as Philip Johnson's Glass House, are about to reopen. I believe the Glass House and many other buildings on the site of the former Johnson estate are completely accessible, although you can't spend a lot of time in it and it's fairly small to begin with. But I do think it's one that has been thought through as a space that is both modernist and accessible.

WL : So that's only a partial answer to that audience member, but we thank you for the question and you've given us a kind of prompt for new investigations.

DS : Yes, indeed.

SP : Are you two ready for the next question?

DS : Bring it.

SP : Awesome, I love the energy. So this next question begins, “Can you talk about some of the pedagogical shifts that you think need to happen in training architects today?” They’re coming from the Harvard Graduate School of Design [GSD]—and then, “there’s an ever increasing interest from students in learning to design accessible spaces,” which definitely tracks.

DS : Wanda is much more qualified to address some of these pedagogical questions since she teaches in a school of architecture. But I wanted to share that, in summer 2019, Jos Boys at The Bartlett School of Architecture at the University of London invited me to participate in a set of workshops organized for non-architects who identified as blind or as visually impaired who wanted to learn about, think about, and get involved in talking about architecture. The Bartlett brought them in for a week or so, providing them with transportation, room and board, and access to its facilities, along with other educators and practicing architects like Chris Downey, who Wanda mentioned earlier as an important consultant to the design of the Ed Roberts Campus in Berkeley. It was an

amazing group of people from all walks of life, different generations, different ethnic and economic backgrounds, who were asked a deceptively simple question: How does your experience of architecture give you tools for thinking about architecture differently? And a large part of this was pedagogically motivated, because The Bartlett really wanted to introduce sensory design as an element in their curriculum for all of their students who were receiving architectural training, not just for students with disabilities, visual or otherwise. In other words, they did not want to include sensory design as some kind of exotic elective; the workshops constituted a kind of pilot program to say we really need to rethink what it is that we do with design and how we talk about the senses. And we also need to rethink who we train to be architects and how we can change the profession! So I was really excited to be part of those conversations. This was all pre-pandemic, so I don’t know where things stand now.

WL : I think what David is suggesting is a really interesting direction. I also want to say what a great question, and I’m really gratified to hear that it’s coming from the GSD. In my time there, albeit not as a design student, I would say that issues of disability and non-normative embodiment generally were very much on the sidelines or considered exotic, as David says; these questions are often marginalized, even stigmatized, topics in architecture. And in fact, if I may tout my future book, *Architecture’s*



*Problem with Disability*, that is one of the things that I write about. But I think there are a couple of threads that may be coming together. And it's really nice to hear that there is growing interest among the students themselves. But I think many faculty, at least in the tenure situation, don't often have this interest or knowledge, so it's great that the drive might be coming from students.

There's an incredible desire for architects, especially new young architects, to do design and do architecture that is about social justice as a way to be relevant and meaningful. But when we talk about "handicap accessible" or ADA compliant, they have become very negative terms that turn off the spigot of creativity. Compliance or access are never understood as thinking about different kinds of embodiment. Thinking about inclusion starts to make architecture extremely potent and relevant as a tool of democracy. And I know that architects, especially young architects, are really interested in this form of practice, but somehow those two poles have not been brought together so much.

Thinking about it in terms of the sensory and focusing on different ways that the body experiences space, as David put it, is one way. But also thinking about it in terms of architecture's civic and political role is another way for disability to gain greater traction within the pedagogical culture. Because I think pedagogical culture is not exactly open to these ideas at the moment, although there are people who have really good knowledge and great ideas.

So I hope they can be brought into mainstream architectural education.

DS : The reason why I became interested in and have devoted a good deal of my career to these ideas is because of the clear relationship between spatial access and political access—that access to space is not philosophical or metaphorical. It is literal. And what disability rights activists of the 1960s and '70s were saying, and what they continue to say today even thirty years after the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, is this: make good on the promise of civil rights so that it's not just an elusive ideal codified in law but activated in the physical, material spaces of our lives. That's why I do this historical work on experiences of disability and experiences of space, and why I'm so interested in the future of architecture as a medium of democratic practice.

WL : There's a famous photograph from the Berkeley disability rights scene—I think it's from the late sixties, early seventies—and one of the protestors has a sign on the back of his wheelchair that says, "I can't even get to the back of the bus." The idea being that there's an even more directly material connection between civil rights for people with disabilities than other civil rights movements that preceded it. And so, if you're an architect and you want to make a difference, this is a very "ready-to-hand" [Heidegger] way to think about inclusion; you can start

there and expand upon it and weave in other ideas. But I think people have only begun to explore what the design potential of this is.

DS : Our colleagues Joel Sanders and Susan Stryker have spearheaded a project called *Stalled*, which focuses on the need for an articulated social relationship between civil rights and bathroom access given the legacy of toilet activism for people with disabilities and, more recently, the very heated legal and cultural debates around the exclusion of trans and genderqueer folks from public bathrooms that match their gender identities. Sanders and Stryker draw attention to shared oppressions and shared strategies of resistance, and they advocate redesigns for public toilets or new designs from the ground up. When you take these ongoing struggles for inclusion seriously and then add to the mix the essential humanity of people needing to pee and poo, you realize that toilet access is not just a civil rights issue. It's a matter of life and death.

WL : I could not agree more. I think a lot of times it might be interesting for architects to look to debates outside of architecture, in the world of queer debates or critical race studies and gender studies, and think about how architecture responds to or addresses some of the questions that emerge in those debates. That can be a fresher beginning than some of the well-known things that architects often become a little bit more literal about.

SP : Well, thank you again. I'll just continue on my train of gratitude for answering our audience questions. And for all you've offered to us this afternoon. I'm going to bring Dan Byers back to close us out.

DB : Hi, everyone. Thank you so much for that. And I'll just out myself as the audience member who asked about examples of modernist buildings that have been adapted. [Laughter] It was a very selfish request and precisely to begin that kind of case-study research that you mentioned, Wanda. Thank you for the V&A tip, David. That's a great place to start, as well.

DS : Dan, if we haven't had an opportunity to suggest a modernist building, well then, the Carpenter Center gets to lead the way and say, "See what we did!"

DB : Great! Why not be first and teach everyone else, right? So anyhow, I can't say more how much we've really appreciated your contributions in this discussion. And I hope it's the first of many that we'll have on this topic. You've set us on the right course. So thank you so much.

DS : Thank you so much for having us.

WL : And for including us in this great discussion. We're all interested to see where it goes.

DB : We'll keep you posted and we'll keep in conversation, hopefully. Take care.

DS : Buona notte!

#### WANDA LIEBERMANN

Wanda Liebermann is an architectural and urban historian, and Assistant Professor at the Gibbs College of Architecture at the University of Oklahoma. She is also a licensed architect with fifteen years of experience practicing in the San Francisco Bay Area. Her research focuses on theories and practices of architecture and urbanism in relationship to disability politics, examining how design shapes identity and citizenship. Her writing has appeared in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, *Future Anterior*, and the *Journal of Architecture*, among others, as well as several edited anthologies. Liebermann is author of the forthcoming book *Architecture's Problem with Disability* from Routledge.

#### DAVID SERLIN

David Serlin is Associate Professor of Communication and Science Studies at the University of California San Diego, and affiliated faculty at the Center for the Study of Social Difference at Columbia University. His research interests include historical and cultural approaches to disability, architecture, urbanism, and sensory design, and his books include *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body and Postwar America* (2004), University of Chicago Press, which was awarded the inaugural Alan Bray Memorial Book Prize from the Modern Language Association. He is also the editor of *Imagining Illness: Public Health and Visual Culture* (2010) from University of Minnesota Press, and author of the forthcoming *Window Shopping with Helen Keller: Architecture and Disability in Modern Culture*, also from the University of Chicago Press. He was awarded the 2020–2021 Rome Prize in Architecture from the American Academy in Rome.

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Publication and Program  
Coordinator: Sir Porte  
Designer: Chad Kloepfer

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