

## **Spatial Justice: A Shifting Perspective to Reframe Universal Design**

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# Spatial Justice: A Shifting Perspective to Reframe Universal Design

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**Abstract.** This paper considers the social, cultural, and structural processes and practices, that are manifested in the built environment and mediated spatially, that create and maintain experiences of exclusion, otherwise known as spatial injustice. Expanding on two decades of case study research and empirical data collected in spatial justice across Canada and Australia, this paper interrogates perspectives of power and spatial injustices that still exist today. These case studies are based in institutions like malls, museums, urban precincts, and universities to usher in a new understanding of universal design through the lens of spatial justice and include creative practice (films), (dis)-audits, co-design processes, and disability allyship. This paper expands on the first comprehensive set of studies across spatial typologies, and how power and spatial justice are manifested and designed into architecture and interior environments—and their fields of knowledge. Key takeaways are new ways of *knowing*, *teaching*, and *doing* in architecture and design to create spatial justice and cultures of inclusion.

**Keywords.** ableism, built environment, social justice, spatial justice, universal design

## 1. Introduction

Reframing universal design through spatial justice goes beyond building codes, guidelines, and standards, and demands new kinds of universal design approaches. This paper critically reflects on the past, current and future of spatial justice, its relationship to critical access approaches, allyship, creative practice, and the implications of this justice-based lens for current practice and research in and around universal design. This research was inspired by the lack of research in spatial justice, and to challenge and expand our understanding of power in architecture and design, particularly by examining power from an interior's perspective (architecture/interior design/interior architecture). While Dovey (2008) argues that the built forms of architecture and urban design act as mediators of social practices of power, it is the tangible examples of how this is manifested in environments that are presented here [1]. For example, Dovey contends that the nature of architecture and design, their silent framings of everyday life, lend them to practices of coercion and seduction, thus legitimising authority and control over people (2008) [1].

## 2. Spatial Justice

In my book, *Design, Disability and Embodiment: Spatial Justice and Perspectives of Power*, I ask, what is spatial justice? Is it the same as social justice? Is it social justice that is manifested into the built environment? Who defines what spatial justice is and, who can affect change towards more universally designed and just environments? [2] Justice is not a new concept, as we have been embedding justice into the spatiality of civil society from as early as Greek city states - *polis* 600BC [2]. When scholars like Soja (2009) for example who claim that “until these ideas are widely understood and accepted, it is essential to make the spatiality of justice as explicit and actively causal as possible. To redefine it as something else is to miss the point and the new opportunities it opens up” (p. 2). [3] Thinking this way about space and justice, not only reminds us that space itself is socially produced but that space and the built environment is not neutral “When we look, we can see how the built environment reflects the identities, differences and struggles of gender, class, race, culture and age” (p.1) [1]. The difference here is that most spatial justice theories look at spatiality (and mostly cities and urban design) from a more macro lens, whereas this paper focuses in one architecture and interiors and on universal design. My research and studies in how spatial justice is taught, understood and practiced also incorporates theories of power and how power is manifested in universal design. Lefebvre et al argued that space “it is a product literally filled with ideologies” (p.31), that these processes underpinning everyday life generate unequal power relations which manifest in inequitable and unjust distributions of social resources, across the space of the city and beyond [4].

Power disparities that are mediated by the built environment are important considerations within a spatial justice theoretical lens, because “justice is more oriented to present day conditions, and imbued with symbolic force that works effectively across cleavages of class, race, gender to foster a collective political consciousness and a sense of solidarity based on widely shared experiences” (p. 4) [3]. Justice has re-emerged as an important field of study for various disciplines. A social justice framework is underpinned by principles of fairness, democracy, rights and responsibilities attached to being a member of a particular social group. It extends beyond the court of law, to the everyday life context. Spatial justice seeks to rebalance the understanding of justice not just as a social and temporal concern, but very much spatial [2]. What is valuable about the justice-based theories and concepts is that it facilitates an opportunity to build a new theory and practice for spatial justice—a praxis that is inclusive and looks towards architecture, interior design/architecture and design. It is crucial in theory and in practice to emphasise explicitly the spatiality of justice and in turn injustice. My research and practice in spatial justice builds upon Soja’s definition of spatial justice, in that it extends the definition of spatial justice to contribute new spatial justice theories and practice. Soja explains:

The specific term “spatial justice” has not been commonly used until very recently, and even today there are tendencies among geographers and planners to avoid the explicit use of the adjective “spatial” in describing the search for justice and democracy in contemporary societies. Either the spatiality of justice is ignored, or it is absorbed (and often drained of its specificity) into such related concepts as territorial justice, environmental justice, the urbanization of injustice, the reduction of regional inequalities, or even more broadly in the generic search for a just city and a just society. All of these variations on the central theme are important and relevant,

but often tend to draw attention away from the specific qualities and meaning of an explicitly spatialized concept of justice and, more importantly, the many new opportunities it is providing not just for theory building and empirical analysis but for spatially informed social and political action (p. 1) [3].

It is also important to situate our understanding of spatial justice beyond theorists, and to look towards its understanding for practitioners, as spatial justice is not just a theory but a part of our architectural and design practice. The quotes below are from a survey of future practitioners (for the detailed study please refer to *Design, Disability and Embodiment: Spatial Justice and Perspectives of Power*) [2]. Here, understanding how injustices are manifested in the built environment which then can lead to exclusionary practices and social injustices is an important concept for future practitioners to understand. Future practitioners stated: “Who has access to spaces and control over what spaces are like has implications for justice. Public spaces with hostile architectural features to deter certain members of society would be an example.”; “Spatial Justice I believe relates to places of power and where we see just or unjust actions through the design of space. This could be racial segregation we saw years ago in America where different colours were separated by physical space. This would be an example of spatial injustice.”; “Spatial justice is a tie between social justice and space. It refers to the fairness of land distribution and use and is largely used across society as a show of hierarchical power.” What is interesting to note from these comments is how many of them identify spatial justice and its relationship to power as something of the past, or of a particular place and not an understanding necessarily that power is manifested in all spaces. This is where a reframing of universal design through spatial justice could have profound impact, not only on future practice but also on how users speak to their rights, access and needs in the built environment and design.

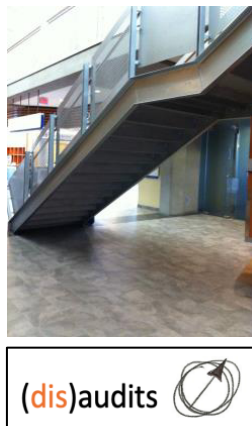
### 3. Case Studies

This paper expands on the first comprehensive set of studies across spatial typologies in *Design, Disability and Embodiment: Spatial Justice and Perspectives of Power*, 2023, and how power and spatial justice are manifested and designed into architecture and interior environments. In this paper several case studies are introduced to usher in a new understanding of universal design through the lens of spatial justice and include creative practice (films), (dis)audits, co-design processes, post-occupancy evaluations (POE's), and disability allyship.

#### 3.1 Universities

Issues of access and audits are often not brought to public awareness. Access audits are often created ‘out of sight.’ Instead, the process and practice of access audits can and should be understood through a spatial justice lens, and go beyond codes, checklists and guidelines, to look at access more holistically. I created *(dis)audits* [2], which permit designers and architects to undertake access audits differently—to intervene in the physical environment through the words and embodied experiences of people with disability. It was through the process of bringing the lived experience and embodied know-how of users into sight, which brought about a new awareness of the environment—an awareness, informed by the nuances of disability to reimagine

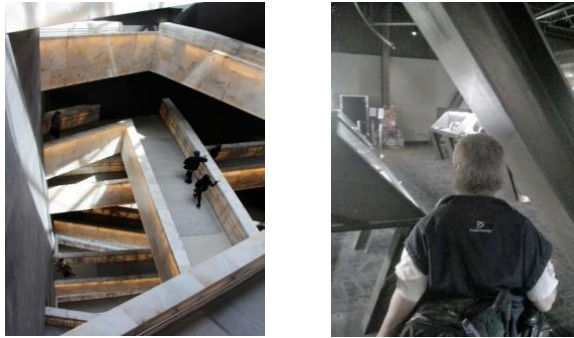
universal design. The first (dis)audit was conceptualised and co-designed with a colleague who is blind, as a design intervention on a university campus in Canada. The (dis)audit asked users to ‘rethink design’ by placing signs all over campus that communicated the lived experience of the user/expert and the experiences of trying to negotiate the campus environment as a user who is blind. This audit was a kind of design activism that focused on the inaccessibility of the university campus environment, where we examined all entries, exits, corners, wayfinding and spaces on the campus together and noted the most hazardous and inaccessible aspects ‘tagging’ the campus through signs that asked the public to rethink design through the lived experience of a user who is blind. In Figure 1, the open staircase in a large communal campus space created serious risks and overhead hazards to all users. This design issue went unnoticed until we conducted (dis)audits with people with lived experience. (dis)-audits can also inform how we rethink post-occupancy evaluations (POEs) more generally through a spatial justice lens and the importance of embodied know-how of all users.



**Figure 1.** Identifying obstacles and barriers through doing (dis)audits on a university campus in Canada.

### 3.2 Museums and Galleries

Through detailed case study research across Canadian museums and galleries (see Figure 2) spatial justices and injustices were analysed across national institutions [5]. Many of the exhibitions in these national institutions were designed to be multisensorial and accessible but the bricks, beams and mortar of the buildings either created spatial justice or major barriers and injustices. For example, in Figure 2, the primary circulation in the museum is not stairs, or an elevator but an accessible ramp that takes visitors from floor to floor, side by side whether walking or in a wheelchair. This universal design allows for spatial justice, allowing most visitors to move throughout the building together and enjoy the same views and experiences, which is rare in most museum architecture.



**Figure 2.** Spatial justice and injustice manifested in Canadian museums.

At Canada's Sports Hall of Fame (CSHF), the beams, bricks and mortar impede the access and spatial justice for visitors. While doing an evaluation of the spatial justice of this museum, my colleague who uses a wheelchair was not able to access some of the spaces and exhibitions of the museum because of the interior architecture and engineering. The building was designed with large metal I-beams crossing through the main exhibition spaces, from floor to ceiling, creating major overhead risks but also spatial injustice for people in wheelchairs, parents with strollers and others with mobility aids [5]. Interestingly, this research was done prior to 2020 when CSHF closed due to COVID-19. The building never reopened, and in 2023 CSHF went from brick-and-mortar to a hybrid model involving digital storytelling [6].

### 3.3 Urban Malls and Precincts

My research across the last decade has also focused on evaluating the spatial injustices in urban spaces. It has seen a rise in 'hostile architecture', otherwise known as defensive architecture (like homeless spikes) throughout many nations in the world. But there are still some examples of urban spaces and cities trying to create a 'just city'. In Vancouver, Canada the non-profit *Raincity Housing* designed benches that unfold into shelters and read "This is a bench" during the day, but light up to reveal "This is a bedroom" at night (see Figure 3) [7]. Perhaps a small step on what Harvey refers to as the path from an urbanism grounded in exploitation, to an urbanism for the human species" [8].



**Figure 3.** Design interventions against 'hostile architecture' in the city.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

Spatial Justice (and in turn Universal/Inclusive Design) is still not well understood or prioritised amongst architects, designers and planners even though users are asking and

have been asking for decades. In Canada, for example, only 10% of Canadians believe their communities are doing a really good job of including diverse voices in planning, and that accessibility (96%) should be prioritised in new buildings in their community [9]. In Australia the statistics are not much better, for example, in a recent study only 51% of respondents said that the architectural profession values diversity and inclusion [10]. In a way this paper is a call to action—that we cannot continue to allow injustices to be built into our environments, and that the potential of spatial justice to shift our perspective to reframe universal design through a social justice lens is paramount. Presented here are three ‘reframes’, as new ways of *knowing*, *teaching*, and *doing* in architecture and design to create spatial justice and cultures of inclusion for all.

#### 4.1 *Knowing*

Knowing differently is to be done through an unknowing. Like Butler, “[We] must recognize that ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at moments of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human” [11]. The only way we can reframe universal design through spatial justice is to embrace an unknowingness and this can lead to safety, dignity, respect, and trust—a precursor to good disability allyship in architecture and design. By this I mean, an unknowingness, where architects and designers acknowledge the limits of their embodied knowledge and co-design/co-constitute knowledge with others. Creating spatial justice is more than just the bricks and mortar of the building, creating ramps and accessible toilets, it is about co-creating dignity and cultural safety. Many access protocols promote *transactional* understandings of the ally, as the altruistic supporter or advocate who assists disabled people for example, to obtain reasonable accommodations, or logistical adjustments to education or employment practice, or general access to public buildings [12]. What I am more strongly arguing for here is for us to move towards disability allyship in architecture and design and a new knowingness—a co-constitutional knowing (beyond the often taken from granted participatory design methods or reference groups) where allyship develops long lasting and sustainable relationships to create spatial justice and reframe universal design [13]. The fact an unconscious bias exists and many people who are invited to be a part of an ‘inclusive or universal design’ process are often just tolerated and accommodated, and then their corporeal and cognitive differences are assimilated the into codes, guidelines and dominant industry practices, is not just [12, 2]. I do believe it is time for a shift towards *unknowing* through allyship, because only then can we really create spatial justice.

#### 4.2 *Teaching*

Spatial Justice has the ability to reframe how and what we teach into our architecture and design education, after all this is where our new practitioners are coming from, and it is critical for them to understand social and spatial justice. From 2006–2021, I embedded theories and practices of spatial justice into my studio, theory and history course across universities in Canada and Australia. I collected data across these courses, and most recently I collected a large data set with 4 surveys and 210 students in the course, Spatial Histories (a large first-year history course with ~550 students) [2]. Here are some of the student responses when asked, “Do you think justice is manifested in the built environment? How?”:

*I think architecture can be the apparatus that can incite justice, utilising architecture's ability to reflect society and communities, it can be the medium in which these justices can be examined in, and possible solutions occur in. (Spatial Histories Student, 2021).*

*I think social justice is manifested within spatial justice. Buildings and spaces have the ability to manipulate our behaviours and attitudes and therefore can manipulate our beliefs towards others or issues (i.e., the spatial justice issue of segregated black and white entrances perpetuates the social justice issue of racism) (Spatial Histories Student, 2021).*

Through reframing architectural/spatial history through spatial justice, students surveyed reported that 93.55% of them (architecture, interior design/architecture and landscape architecture students) were challenged by this course to think about architecture/design in new ways [2].

#### 4.3 Doing

Doing in relation to the design of the built environment can also assist clients, developers, policy makers, etc., to reconsider universal design through spatial justice. As has been presented, spatial justice is not just a theory but a way of doing in our practices. How do we begin to think about doing spatial justice? One of the ways we can start to do spatial justice (and in turn universal design) is to consider new methods for practice. One of these new methods is what I call *Dialoguing while wandering*, an embodied method often used in post occupancy evaluations (POE's) and through creative practice like film to uncover a world perceived from different angles and viewed through diverse vantage points (often with participants who are d/Deaf, blind, have low vision, use a wheelchair or other mobility aid, and those that identify as neurodiverse) [14]. Figure 4 shows Sarah, Megan and I dialoguing while wandering in an urban mall in Brisbane, Australia and us evaluating the universal design of the downtown urban mall and its Braille trail, as Sarah is blind and uses a white cane.



**Figure 4.** *Dialoguing while wandering* on the Braille trail in an urban mall.

The Braille trail goes unnoticed to most using this urban mall but for Sarah and other users who are blind or have low vision, it starts to create spatial justice. As researchers and designers, we would never have been able to understand the use and need of a Braille trail but through the method of dialoguing while wandering with Sarah we mapped out the encounters with one another, and it brought forth phenomena that may often escape

awareness in people who inhabit a particular environment [15]. These wanderings, created through film, foster insights into the doing of spatial justice, and new ways to evaluate universal design. My research has shown spatial justice is not a well understood concept in relation to architecture and design even though it has been around for at least fifteen years. It is important to share diverse voices, from leading scholars, case studies inclusive of people with differing abilities, and the voices of practitioners and students in order to create just spaces and equal access for all [2]. Shifting our understanding of universal design, which is most often codified and understood through guidelines, to one of spatial justice means we can begin to cultivate a praxis of spatial justice. The challenge here is for us all to start thinking differently, to use spatial justice and creative practice as a lens to critique and deconstruct ableism, and in turn ableist architecture and design.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper takes a more holistic approach to shifting our perspectives towards spatial justice in universal design by not only looking at praxis but also education. In order to understand how power and injustices are designed into the built environment and to be critical of our roles in this injustice, we need to embed this criticality into architecture and design education. This research has presented new ways of *knowing*, *teaching*, and *doing* across architecture and design to create spatial justice and cultures of inclusion.

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