

The Emancipatory Design Manifesto: Let's Suppose That Disability Does Not Exist

Jon Dag Rasmussen^{a,1} and Anne Britt Torkildsby^b

^a*Department of the Built Environment, Aalborg University*

^b*Department of Design, Norwegian University of Science and Technology*

Abstract. In this paper we present and propose the concept of *Emancipatory Design* (ED), which is an alternative way of thinking about the human being and the ever intricate relations between people, design, architecture and the built environment. The paper is given the form of a manifesto and has the overall aim to reflect critically on the possibility of design as a practice that potentially carry emancipatory effects in the everyday lives of particular human beings. Defining ED, we draw on notions from philosophy and the history of ideas to challenge the concept of human disability often at play in writings concerned with design and architecture. This approach allows for a provocative, disruptive and experimental attempt to relativize and cancel the notion of disability – and, subsequently, to explore the possibilities inherent to this maneuver in the realm of design thinking. With ED we propose a concept that works as a contribution to the community engaged in Universal Design (UD), as well as a gentle objection and critique of the abstract and intangible element of universality at play within this tradition.

Keywords. Emancipatory Design, Critical and Existential Design, Speculative Design, Universal Design, Manifesto, (dis)Ability

1. Introduction

In this paper we propose the concept of Emancipatory Design (ED)² that works as an addendum, or an assistant notion, to the broad conceptual umbrella of Universal Design. ED is formulated on the very basic – and somewhat idealistic – premise that the disciplines of design and architecture must encompass emancipatory and liberating aspects for the humans, and non-human beings, for which the efforts and solutions are intended. Another pivotal element expressed within the frame of ED is that the view of humanity, and of life in general, which is embedded in every designed product, building, and exterior space, must be both reflected upon and challenged in the outset. We argue that design projects in general should aim to be highly critical against “business as usual”. This critique applies to the often vaguely defined and imprecise notion of “the user”, or even “the end user”, as these concepts appear in mainstream design and architectural lingo and writings, and, on a more crucial level, to the characteristics, expectations and

¹ Jon Dag Rasmussen, Department of the Built Environment, Aalborg University, A. C. Meyers Vænge 15, 2450 Copenhagen SV, jdr@build.aau.dk.

² ED is not to be confused with the work of design researcher Lesley-Ann Noel, and her concept of *Emancipatory Design Thinking* (e.g. “Promoting an Emancipatory Research Paradigm in Design Education and Practice”, 2016). Despite some very overall similarities and shared ambitions inherent to the two concepts, they are very different in terms of content and scope.

normatively informed ideas about human capability and functionality that implicitly forms the basis on which architecture and design is often executed. Moreover, with ED we argue for a critical stance towards the comprehensive and deeply entangled relationships between design, architecture, and commercial interests.

With ED we lay ground for critical reflection on the wide diversity of people and abilities – hence represent an opposition towards the medical and clinical discourses at play, in e.g. the area of health design as well as in the normatively informed health discourses circulating in societies of the late modernity at large. Reflections and critical discussions can help us ensure that human beings are firstly conceived of as exactly *human beings*, with a range of personal abilities and capabilities, before they are exposed to various practices and forceful processes of marginalization inherent to e.g. the social position of ‘the disabled person’ – a position that inflict severe performative consequences and produce certain kinds of (dis-)location in the life of individual human beings [1]. In this regard, ED is targeting emancipation from the prejudice, ruling and marginalization that follow in the slipstreams of stigmatizing labelling processes.

Furthermore, ED is defined by a preoccupation with particularity and an insistent focus on conditions characteristic of the particular people and environments that are subjected to design and architectural processes. The focus on particularity represents a gentle objection and critique of the general notion of universality as expressed in the paradigm of universal design, albeit in the most edifying and engaged manner. In this context, the argument is that to change the world by design (and architecture), and thus to develop solutions that are emancipatory and liberating by function, we must produce and possess both nuanced and context specific knowledge about people and environment laying the foundation for changes appropriate in the given contexts. Moving from ambition to action calls for novel methods and thorough procedures by which interdisciplinary teams can tailor, develop and secure the implementation of adequate initiatives in specific environments.

The paper is given the form of a manifesto in which we declare our intentions, motifs, and motivations regarding the work with design and architecture as an act of emancipatory practice. The manifesto will comprise four sections. The first section describes the preliminary and basic prerequisites on which the development of ED is based. This is followed by an outline of the idealistic, political, and societal elements inherent to this way of thinking about design and architecture, along with a description of the academic and theoretical approaches and currents serving as sources of inspiration in the formulation of ED. Next section comprises some preliminary methodological offerings and reflections – paths to be followed in the further development and implementation of ED in practice. Finally, we conclude with a short recap describing the key elements comprising the Emancipatory Design Manifesto.

2. Preliminary and basic prerequisites

In this section we outline the preliminary and basic prerequisites and premises on which the contribution rests. This is done to address the building blocks we depart from in the development of ED.

Prerequisite I:

All human beings are confined and restricted within their own bodies to some extent.

Prerequisite II:

The notion that given persons *have handicap* and *live with disability* are products of social constructions and a deficiency-oriented worldview that facilitate and enable a structural hegemony in which certain expressions of humanity are prioritized over others. Inherent to this is the acknowledgement that conceptions of both physical and mental disability (and other forms of “deviance”, in the understanding *divergence from conventionally accepted notions of ‘normality’*) have been defined and understood in varying ways during given historical epochs.

With *prerequisite I*, we emphasize a common and universal phenomenon shared by all human beings. That is to say, the experience of being restricted, confined and limited in everyday life is a common experience concerning any living being. This goes for all of us whether we are living with so-called ‘ordinary’ bodily and mental functions, with minor variations in our abilities (physical and/or mental/psychical) or with major functional variations having a distinct and extensive impact on everyday life. When scrutinized in detail, all members of humankind experience limitations and restrictions in terms of participation, possibilities and the unfolding of individual agency – either on occasion or on a more permanent basis. In a phenomenological perspective, the human being is born into this world in a body that also constitute our primary mode of existence, our *being-in-the-world* [2]. According to this existentially and sensory oriented perspective, we exist in the world *through* and *in* our corporeality; and, adding to this, the myriad corporal experiences that also shapes our consciousness and our intentionality in fundamental ways [3]. Hence, human corpo(reality), i.e. *to have a body* and *to be in a body*, is to be limited *per se*. Following these lines of thought, the body is our first and primary set of conditions, thus corporality is the basis for all other experiences, processes, relations and opportunities in life. In this regard, all human beings are inherently confined, trapped and restricted within their bodies (and their bodily-intentional field of action) to some extent and degree – some more, obviously, others less.

Prerequisite II, goes in another direction by drawing on the historically based analytical argument that notions of handicap and disability are social constructs that undergo serious changes during and in-between given epochs. In the work of French philosopher and historian of ideas, Michel Foucault, it is distinct how social constructions and the phenomena arising in the wake of historically bound rationales and ideas about the human being, come to matter in the form of social exclusion and the construction of ‘the deviant’ as a social category. In a lecture from 1979, Foucault describes the genealogical method he subscribed to and its critical potentials and implications in connection with his work on biopolitics. Here, Foucault states that he “start from the theoretical and methodological decision that consists in saying: Let’s suppose that universals do not exist.” [4]. In other words, Foucault attempts to start from a sort of neutral position with which he does not presuppose anything about the human being, not even universals and so-called ‘meta-narratives’. Then, he writes, he put the question to history and historians by asking “How can you write history if you do not accept a priori the existence of things like the state, society, the sovereign, and subjects?” [5]. The critique posed here is that all attempts at describing the human being is dependent on categories, categorizations and on certain historical understandings of existing societal institutions and the intricate practices exercised in, and around, these institutions. To gain a critical distance necessary in the analysis of human beings and the socio-material environments (societies) in which we live, Foucault starts with the attempt at peeling off all layers of pre-understanding. The argument is that by doing so, it

becomes possible to ask new and fundamental questions. Foucault employed this method in the case of madness, a subject he worked consistently with:

“Let’s suppose that madness does not exist. If we suppose that it does not exist, then what can history make of these different events and practices which are apparently organized around something that is supposed to be madness.” [6]

In the process of formulating ED, we are very much inspired by this approach towards understanding the human being as a product of biopolitics working on both implicit and explicit levels of any society. Furthermore, we find that a Foucauldian approach towards disability can supply us with a new footing in challenging the paradigm of disability currently at work. By paraphrasing the sentences above, we wish to pose a question and an argument that possess both provocative and productive implications, namely:

Let’s suppose that disability does not exist.

If we suppose that disability does not exist, we are simultaneously forced to apply a new perspective on design, architecture and the built environment as such. Applying this maneuver already in the initiating phase of the development process – before the first sketch of a public school, playground, bus-shield, etc., is made – the preconditions simply change quite a lot, maybe they are even turned upside down? Instead of applying our focus on the individual human being that is not able to use given design solutions and built environments due to personal variations in ability, we encounter designs and built environments that are not sufficiently suited and adapted to the life of human beings and the variations in being human that are normalized and accepted with this discursive maneuver. If human disability does not exist, but we instead embrace a term used more and more in Sweden and Norway, i.e., ‘normbrytande funktionsvariation (freely translated to “norm-breaking functional variation”; means having a functional variation that conflicts with society’s prevailing norms of body function or performance) [7]) as an immanent part of the human condition, we have a whole new set of norms on the rise. If human disability does not exist, instead we encounter *disabling design, disabling architecture, disabling built environments*, etc. or even *dark design* [8]. By the same token, and consequently, we can start talking about ED as a response and a methodical approach with which to counteract these incarcerating and constraining elements experienced and encountered by human beings in their engagement with the physical world.

The two interrelated prerequisites outlined above constitute the primary building blocks on which ED is formulated. Firstly, we depart from the acknowledgement that all human beings are restricted and confined in relation to their bodies to some extent. Secondly, we perform a discursive critique that highlight how the human being is positioned within the boundaries of a conventional and current disability paradigm. Instead of subscribing to this notion of human disability, we resist and counteract it by proposing a new and stronger emphasis on functional variations as an integral part of the human condition. As a product of this maneuver, the stigmatizing and marginalizing consequences posed on the individual human being is relocated to concern the responsibilities of design, architecture, etc.; in fact, everyone involved in planning, building and maintaining the built environment.

Hereby we initiate a discussion that aims at removing the individual human being from issues regarding disability as a person-centered phenomenon – and to stress the stance that to move forward, we need to firstly grasp how design and architecture as

enterprises can entail and produce disabling consequences, and next transform this into a new perspective when dealing with future built environments.

3. On ideals, utopias & design theoretical inspirations

*“We have to imagine something that doesn’t exist
Carve intentionally into the future
And demand space for hope [...]
Let’s write music for our destination” [9]*

The citation above is from a short and poetic text, “Imagine”, written by islandic artist Björk that is featured in an anthology exploring the myriad implications on the world as we know it posed by the Anthropocene. The excerpt is included here because it reflects a key element also central to ED-thinking. Working with ED demands for approaches that are partly visionary partly utopian, but simultaneously very realistic and sensitive towards current states and circumstances. Therefore, the attitude represented in ED is defined by a somewhat naïve idealism that dares to dream on behalf of the populations and people that will live and function in the designs developed and built, now and for decades to come. Knowing that the construction industry is responsible for a considerable amount of the ‘black’ resource consumption, thus paying a significant contribution to the ongoing and irreversible global climate change, any design action is also deeply embedded in local and global processes implying an immense amount of responsibility and circumspection from people working within all areas of design and architecture. In this regard, when it concerns the common future goods available on any scale, social and environmental sustainability are deeply connected and intertwined. In questions regarding both kinds of sustainability, we must imagine something, and some things, which doesn’t yet exist. We must carve intentionally into the future in order to demand, imagine and create space for hope – *space* in terms of physical, social and inclusive space as well as imaginative, experienced and emancipatory space.

A prominent and increasing critique of architecture and planning arising in the wake of resent and present activist movements with connection to e.g. feminist theory is that these practices, and the physical designs they promote, favor certain kinds of people and conditions/functionalities over others. And, following this, that social and a range of other inequalities therefore are systematically built into our cities, homes, and neighborhoods [10]. What has been laying the basis for development of the built environment (in the eyes and hands of commercial developers) until this point, is therefore a particular set of notions and presuppositions about the human being and the range of ‘ordinary’ human functionality (cf. prerequisite II, outlined above). In other words, architecture and design can be understood as the operationalization of certain current and historically embedded norms and ideals in(to) firm objects. Monuments, buildings, and spaces are elements and signs in ‘a language’ that both expands upon and reveal existing ideas about the societal participant (the human being) and the capabilities and ways in which this actor is (supposed to be) working. The reaction to these ways of conceiving of the world, and of the relation between human and non-human beings and the world of artifacts that we inhabit – from the position of ED, is demanding and crucial. It consists in simply saying that *this must change*. By joining Björk in her call from the position of design, we can state: Let’s write music for our destination, let’s draw up and

design a world that encompass emancipatory qualities in the lives of individuals and collectives alike.

Taking a departure in critical and existential design [11] and speculative critical design [12], we argue for a need to turn these conventional modes of conceiving of and thinking about the human being in its environment upside down. Instead of asking commercial developers and actors what future needs will be from their perspective, and instead of letting commercial interests dictate design and the built environment by measures and considerations that are other-than-human (economy, conventions, standards etc.), speculative and critical design argues that skepticism towards consumer culture is a key element as every design actor is obliged to question the given assumptions surrounding any project [13]. In the words of Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, speculative critical design (SCD) is about "... critical thinking, that is, not taking things for granted, being skeptical, and always questioning what is given." [14]. And, as they further argue, the speculative element of this approach is a way of fostering and igniting social dreaming that makes it possible to reflect upon and discuss societal needs and issues, and, furthermore, to respond on these reflections and their implications by means of design. On this subject, SCD offer possibilities to reflect critically on the social and societal foundations on which planners, designers, developers, and architects stand when carrying out design. This approach allows for a productive and socially oriented detachment from procedures and logics inherent to design processes defined by a "profit first, then people" logic. The premise outlined here is that in order to create broadly accommodating and applicable, inclusive designs and environments, the human being – also described as "the user"/"the end-user" in conventional design and architectural lingo – must be placed at the heart of this process from the initial stages throughout the entire span of given projects. Furthermore, such inclusion must be informed and secured by the application of procedures, approaches, and methods able to generate knowledge about concrete human beings, or users of the future design, in a specific environment and context.

4. Preliminary methodological offerings – operationalization of ED

The ideal of ED can be understood in opposition to strands of (design)thinking that operate under terms as e.g. "barrier free design", "design for all" and the general characteristics expressed in the notion of *universal design*. ED poses a gentle critique of the element of universality expressed in the notion of universal design by pointing to the necessity of particularity in any given design approach. Whereas all design 'takes place' and whereas any architectural design process distinguishes itself by the literal creation or change of a particular physical space, a setting, a context, a building or a place, ED is preoccupied with a focus on particularity capable of reflecting this inevitable fact. Architecture is immanently about places and particular environments, not about universal place, which, by the way, is a self-contradictory term [15]. Furthermore, any design project is aimed at a particular group of people inhabiting or using a specific physical environment that is situated in a particular cultural and societal context. Again, the argument underlining ED is that development and creation of design must therefore thoroughly understand and consider the societal and cultural variations and norms at play in the specific environments addressed by design endeavors. These norms are indeed particular and connected to both cultural variation and preferences held by the specific groups and communities in which the design is implemented. In order to succeed; and in

order to promote the desired emancipatory (or other) effects in the lives of the people targeted through design, the work must be based on complex understanding and analyses able to take these aspects into account. In other words, design able to address specific needs as these exist among actual human beings must be particular – not universal. And the ways in which we aim to apprehend and acknowledge the needs and conditions among people living in environments subjected to design and architectural projects must be steered by an interest in the particularities of everyday life in context, not the universals of being human on a general scale.

Within the frame of ED, this acknowledgement is reacted upon by the application and modification of a variety of methods. We argue that ED entails a well-developed methodology that draw on acknowledgements and tools from the realm of the social sciences as well as on methodology, acknowledgements and working modes from the world of design. ED is therefore defined by being research-based in a very direct and literal manner, since any intervention and implementation is based on knowledge acquired in the specific setting. In the operationalization of the ambitions inherent to ED, we draw on methods as ethnographic fieldwork [16], conduction of interdisciplinary workshops and other participatory formats as well as on other techniques of empirical knowledge production adequate in the individual case. The primary criteria in the selection, application and modification of methods are that the approach chosen can redeem the ambition at understanding the conditions, phenomena, the needs as well as the context (and its people) in which ED is carried out.

The slogan we want to contribute with, and stress is: “Let’s be particular”. In order to meet human beings with design, and in order to secure environments able to carry emancipatory effects, impacts and implications, we need to understand the conditions connected to the everyday lives of actual people of flesh, blood and bones. These conditions are particular. And they are entangled with, (in)formed by, and emergent properties of societal, environmental and cultural variations characteristic of the specific context in which a given community is taking place.

5. Conclusion and Considerations – an Emancipatory Design Manifesto

This paper explores the possibilities that emerge when the notion of human disability is critically challenged and disrupted. Instead of subscribing to the premise that disability is a phenomenon clinging to the human being *per se*, with ED we argue that a central constituent of being human, or of being alive on a more general scale, is the experience of being restricted. If we acknowledge that restrictions and limitations are inherent properties of the human condition as any human being encounter limitations regarding so-called individual freedom and agency in some form, both continually and at points during their life span, there is no strict contradiction or opposition between ability and the experience of being restricted in some contexts and settings and to some extent. Therefore, with ED we incite for the discursive and activistic action that consist in relocating the first syllable in the concept of disability from the sphere of the human being to the sphere of design and the built environment. A consequence of this simple, but nevertheless very decisive, maneuver is that we now encounter the human being as abled (in opposition to *dis-abled*) in a variety of different ways. The notion of *being able* is hereby an open-ended and inclusive one embracing a multitude of expressions, functionalities and human variations. Simultaneously this relocation imposes a whole new level of responsibility and demands on the products of design and architecture

because what emerges in the wake of this conceptual action is potentially *disabling design, disabling architecture, disabling built environments*. Proposing the concept of ED is an explicit approach with which we place the responsibility of securing inclusive design and both broadly and specifically accommodating architecture in the hands of designers, architects, stakeholders and developers. Within the ED paradigm it is no longer sufficient or acceptable to use the notion of human disability as a pretext for designs that does not meet a broadly embracing and representational conception of humankind. Instead, and on the contrary, the endeavor is to emancipate human beings by means of design.

The paper attempts to paint a picture of how the world would look like without the concept of human disability that is currently at play. A world where the term ‘disability’ – all too often promoting stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination – no-longer exist and people are treated as (abled) equals no matter what their circumstances may be. Successfully applying this declaration of principles, policies, or intentions if you like, i.e., the Emancipatory Design Manifesto, onto the way we plan, design and maintain the future built environment, calls for a new generation of designers and architects, that a) are trained to shift focus from universality to particularity, b) dare to dream up possible futures – hence create debate, initiate critiques and discussions about the current state of things, c) have the skills to work in interdisciplinary teams (consisting of experts like ethicists, political and social scientists, economists, etc.), and d) have the know-how to develop this way of thinking further.

By introducing ED to design and architecture students in hands-on speculative and critical design workshops all over Scandinavia, thus letting them explore and hopefully embrace, what Dunne and Raby refer to as, “the many tools available for crafting not only things but also ideas,” namely fictional worlds, cautionary tales, what-if scenarios, thought experiments, counterfactuals, etc. [17], our hope is that the design professionals of tomorrow will apply ED-thinking and thus generate emancipatory and liberating design and architecture for the near future.

The Emancipatory Design Manifesto might be a lofty utopia for many of us that have been in this game for some time. However, it is crucial to consider the next generation of designers and architects who are eager to learn, dear to turn things upside down, put their ideas to the test and to integrate current debates, critiques and societal needs in their work. Our impression from e.g. conducting critical design workshops – for students in the disciplines of design, architecture, heritage studies, urbanism, spatial planning, etc. – for close to 10-years [11, 18, 19, 20, 21] is, that they are most certainly up for the task. Tomorrow’s designers already dream and speculate about how things could and should be – no doubt. And they can redeem these visions and imaginaries in their work.

Surely ED has its obvious weaknesses, self-contradictions and flaws: the ideas are new, in progress and thus untested. Therefore, the paper also raises several vital questions and inconsistencies awaiting to be addressed. At the present state the manifesto is a proposal for further thinking, action and reflection. The primary objective at this point is to push and provoke the boundaries inherent to the world of design and architecture, and to challenge some of the assumptions and normative conceptions that immanently occur within any tradition. In this regard, ED is also a contribution to debates in the Universal Design community with which we dare to disturb, disrupt and hopefully spark necessary and critical discussions pointing forward. So, please join us in this manifesto and in the discussions it may initiate. Sign up, take a step outside the comfort zone and help build a new world in which human disability is replaced by human ability. In which

(emancipatory) design is carried out based on thorough insights and research produced in particular settings, among particular people living with particular conditions. And, in which design artifacts and architecture are results of interdisciplinary and engaged collaboration between professionals with disparate and complementary perspectives concerning the human being.

References

- [1] Goffman E. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin Books; 1963.
- [2] Merleau-Ponty M. *The Phenomenology of Perception*. New York: Routledge; 2012 [1945].
- [3] Merleau-Ponty M. *Eye and Mind*. In: Edie JM, editor. *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art and Politics*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press; 1964. p. 159-190.
- [4] Foucault M. *The Birth of Biopolitics*. New York: Picador; 2008. p. 3.
- [5] *Ibid.*: p. 3
- [6] *Ibid.*
- [7] Utopia (2022). *Ordlista*. Available at: <http://www.utopias.se/ordlista/> [Accessed 19 June 2022]
- [8] Jensen OB. *Dark Design: Mobility Injustice Materialized*. In: Cook N & Butz D, editors. *Mobilities, Mobility Justice and Social Justice*. London: Routledge; 2018. p. 116-128. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780815377047>
- [9] Björk. *Imagine*. In: Krogh M, editor. *Connectedness: An Incomplete Encyclopedia of the Anthropocene*. Copenhagen: Strandberg Publishing; 2020. p. 228-229.
- [10] Kern L. *Feminist City: Claiming Space in a Man-made World*. London: Verso; 2020.
- [11] Torkildsby AB. *Existential design – Revisiting the “dark side” of design thinking*. Borås, Sweden: Responstryck AB; 2014.
- [12] Dunne A & Raby F. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Cambridge: The MIT Press; 2013.
- [13] *Ibid.*
- [14] *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- [15] Tuan YF. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 1977.
- [16] Rasmussen JD. *Vejfarende etnografi: Om at træde ind i landskabet gennem længerevarende feltarbejde*. In: Jacobsen MH, Jensen HL, editors. *Etnografier*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag; 2018. p. 75-103.
- [17] Dunne A & Raby F. *Speculative Everything: Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. Cambridge: The MIT Press; 2013.
- [18] Torkildsby AB. *Critical design – A new paradigm for teaching and learning universal design*. In: Berg Bohemia A, et al. editors. *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education: Building Community: Design Education for a Sustainable Future*; 2017 Sep 7-8; Oslo (Norway). Glasgow: The Design Society; c2017. p. 026-031.
- [19] Torkildsby AB. *Empathy Enabled by Critical Design – A New Tool in the Universal Design Toolbox*. In: Craddock G, et al. editors. *Proceedings of the Universal Design and Higher Education in Transformation Congress: Transforming our World Through Design, Diversity and Education*; 2018 30 Oct-2 Nov; Dublin (Ireland): IOS Press; c2018. p. 760-771.
- [20] Torkildsby AB, Vaes KRV. *Addressing the Issue of Stigma-free Design Through Critical Design Workshops*. In: Bohemia E, et al. editors. *Proceedings of the 21st International Conference on Engineering and Product Design Education: Towards a New Innovation Landscape*; 2019 12-13 Sept; Glasgow (Scotland): The Design Society; c2019.
- [21] Vaes KRV, Torkildsby AB, Boeck DM. *Design with a Critical Lens - Teaching Students How to Find, Rather Than Solve, Design Challenges Using Interdisciplinary Workshops*. Forthcoming.