

Can blind people make great architects?

Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London (UCL) has been running an architecture workshop for people with visual impairments

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- 1 Visualize yourself entering a new building. What do you notice first? The answer for most people will probably be the internal structure, the colour of the walls, the light entering through the windows. But stay a little longer and you might start to experience the space differently: you'll hear sound reverberating, you'll feel air currents, textures and materials, you'll smell wafts from the kitchen.
- 2 For blind people, this multi-sensory experience is their first impression of a space. And now a new programme is trying to harness that unique ability by training more visually impaired people to become architects. As the first step in running a foundation course aimed at people who see things differently, the Bartlett School of Architecture at UCL ran an architecture and design workshop for people with visual impairments in summer, 2019.
- 3 "Going to start an architecture degree as a visually impaired person is so horrendously daunting. There's so much that's inaccessible," said Poppy Levison, one of the students on the five-day course, who is about to start studying at Central Saint Martins. "I've been brought up to analyze spaces," she says. "I remember my vision support worker when I was four asking: 'Is it better if the window's behind you in the classroom?' It's something I've always been asked to think about."
- 4 One key exercise in the workshop involves documenting how different spaces make you feel. Levison has particularly enjoyed sharing thoughts with her fellow students. "I know my experience, but that's not what's always going to be best for everyone," she says. "Some people really like daylight, and some people really don't. It's about finding ways in the future to balance those ideas within a building."
- 5 The workshop is run by the DisOrdinary Architecture Project, which aims to change attitudes towards disability and accessibility. DisOrdinary promotes the social model of disability, which argues that people are only disabled when they are confronted with a barrier. If those barriers are removed, the disability ceases to exist.
- 6 As such, the founders believe that integrating the perspectives of people with a range of disabilities into the architectural design process from the outset will build better spaces for everybody. "If people from a whole cross section of society aren't involved in architecture, then the outcome at the end won't work," says Zoe Partington, an artist and one of the co-founders. "If you develop a building with incredible acoustic capabilities so sound doesn't reverberate around, it's not just about disabled people; it works for everybody. It can still be a beautiful environment, aesthetically amazing, but you can get the balance right."
- 7 Visually impaired architects are also more attuned to the importance of wayfinding, which is especially valuable in public transit areas, as well as the need for space for guide dogs – which likewise benefits wheelchair users and people with children. Jos Boys, a co-founder of DisOrdinary and a lecturer at the Bartlett, thinks there is growing interest in inclusion and alternative perspectives. "It feels like a new generation's coming in," she says. "My experience with younger students is that they're much more interested in that stuff. They see it as a positive; it's something they really want to get engaged with."
- 8 The Bartlett's work with DisOrdinary is led by Alan Penn. As well as wanting to increase diversity in a profession he describes as a "monoculture" dominated by white architects from mostly affluent backgrounds, he is looking to foster new ways of thinking about architectural aesthetics.
- 9 "It occurred to me you'd get different ideas if you had some people involved where the visual sense wasn't their primary way of thinking about things," he says. "I'm trying to disrupt the architectural fixation with the visual. I don't want to patronize blind people or lead them up the garden path."
- 10 He says there is genuine interest from the profession in increasing representation from people with visual impairments and other disabilities. "As soon as I mention it to leading practices, they want to be involved. They have the same issues about diversity and new thinking."

11 Although there are some visually impaired people working as architects (often without disclosing their disabilities for fear of stigma), Penn has identified just two practising blind architects in the world. One of these is Chris Downey, a San Francisco-based architect. He lost his sight 11 years ago, after 20 years in the profession.

12 Downey is doubtful that, at present, architecture is a viable profession for someone who has been blind since birth. While there are ways to enable the blind and severely visually impaired to contribute – for instance, through tactile drawings and 3D printing – licensing exams are a barrier. "I don't know that you could go into a traditional practice," he says.

13 Nevertheless, there is a spectrum of visual impairment, and Downey thinks that even for

those who are completely blind, there is value in learning the principles of architectural design, not least because these can be applied to a range of creative careers. His experience of becoming blind later in life has fundamentally shaped his understanding of the purpose of architecture.

14 "It's less about the sight I've lost and more about the realization of how much of the environmental experience I wasn't designing, I was leaving to chance, leaving to possible failure because I wasn't designing for it," he says. "I've discovered more possibilities and a strategy for a richer design than I was working with when I was sighted."

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A. Read the article and answer the questions.

1. The School of Architecture at University College London ran an architecture and design workshop in the summer. Who was the course for?
2. How long did the course last?
3. What is the aim of the DisOrdinary Architecture Project?
4. How long in total has Chris Downey been an architect?
5. How many practising blind architects are there in the world?
6. What, according to the article, are visually impaired architects more attuned to?

B. Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a noun meaning *a smell that floats through the air in a gentle way* (para 1)
2. an adjective meaning *difficult or impossible to reach* (para 3)
3. an adverb that means *in a way that relates to beauty, especially in art* (para 6)
4. an adverb meaning *in the same way or in a similar way* (para 7)
5. a noun meaning *the belief that all people should feel that they are included in society, even if they lack some advantages* (para 7)
6. a noun meaning *a very strong interest in something that prevents you from paying attention to anything else* (para 9)
7. a six-word idiomatic phrase that means *give someone false information that means they will waste their time* (para 9)
8. a noun meaning *the treatment of a particular type of behaviour as wrong or embarrassing and making people who behave in this way feel ashamed* (para 11)