Appendix to ARP Blog 1: Extended Context to Research

Extended Positionality Statement

As a tutor in my fifth year of teaching at CSM, I also work in industry as a qualified architect, focusing on social justice in the built environment and on design quality through people-centred places and community agency in shaping their cities and environments. My role as an Associate Lecturer and design tutor at CSM positions me as a facilitator of learning for a studio of 13 first-year BA Architecture students, working within project briefs set by others, whilst guiding students through their design process and learning journey.

My interest in equitable environments has been longstanding, though my own architectural education offered limited space to explore these themes critically. It was only later in my professional practice that I recognised a fundamental tension: the industry increasingly seeks designers who can create for people, yet provides little framework for understanding what this truly means or how to approach it meaningfully. My realisation has driven my commitment to expanding both my own knowledge and my students' understanding of inclusive design, moving beyond narrow interpretations focused solely on mobility and physical accessibility, to encompass culture, diverse needs and wants, age, backgrounds, and the multiplicity of human experience.

As a woman of colour, born and raised in the city I teach and with ample industry experience in the field I am exploring, I am conscious of my positionality and the dynamics it brings to the research. I strive to be approachable whilst deliberately removing myself from the centre of learning. Instead, my pedagogical approach focuses on creating and holding space for others' stories and lived experiences to influence collective learning. This commitment to centring student voices and experiences whilst acknowledging my dual role as tutor-researcher shapes both my ethical approach and methodological choices in this action research project.

However, my position as an hourly-paid Associate Lecturer, working with prescribed briefs rather than setting curriculum, also presents certain constraints. I cannot redesign the project briefs themselves. Still, I can explore how I facilitate student engagement with their requirements, particularly around inclusive design, and how I might nurture the critical thinking and empathy necessary for socially just architectural practice.

Reflections on Student Resistance to Inclusive Design

The conversations with students about accessible design features were revealing in multiple ways. Their language, describing ramps and lifts as features that "ruined" their designs, positioned accessibility as fundamentally antagonistic to aesthetic quality. The assumption that spaces were "for someone who was fully mobile" demonstrated a default user in students' minds: able-bodied, neurotypical, fitting within narrow parameters of "normal" embodiment.

These moments highlighted several pedagogical challenges:

The Technical Compliance Mindset: Students appeared to view accessibility requirements as box-ticking exercises imposed from outside, rather than as fundamental ethical considerations intrinsic to good design. The question wasn't "How do we design spaces that welcome diverse bodies and experiences?" but rather "How do we meet these requirements with minimal disruption to our design?"

The Aesthetic Hierarchy: There was an implicit assumption that aesthetic considerations should take precedence over access needs, revealing deeply embedded values about what "good" architecture means and who it serves.

The Invisible Default User: By designing for the "fully mobile," students revealed an unexamined assumption about whose needs are centred and whose are considered "special" or "additional." This reflects what Boys (2014) identifies as the problem with conventional approaches to accessibility: they position disability as deviant from a norm, rather than recognising the diversity of embodied experience as fundamental to human life.

Limited Understanding of Inclusivity: Students' focus on ramps and lifts as the entirety of "accessibility" demonstrated a narrow, compliance-based understanding. Missing was awareness of sensory considerations, wayfinding, cultural responsiveness, neurodiversity, age-related needs, temporary disabilities, and the many other dimensions of inclusive design.

These conversations made clear that providing students with technical information about accessibility standards would be insufficient. What was needed was a more fundamental shift in consciousness, a development of empathy, critical awareness of their own positionality, and understanding of design as inherently political and ethical.

Connecting to Course Values and Manifesto

The BA Architecture course at Central Saint Martins explicitly centres social and environmental justice. The course overview states that it "embeds racial, social and environmental justice through a curriculum that centres on care, climate, cooperation and agency" and emphasises that "architecture is about people and how we interact with our environments" (CSM, 2024). The vision is "framed by a culture of critical care" that promotes "responsibility beyond the client and understanding the consequences of actions for people and planet."

The Spatial Practices Manifesto further articulates commitments to:

- Diverse perspectives and ways of knowing
- Questioning dominant narratives in spatial practice
- Centring ethics, care, and social responsibility
- Recognising architecture's role in perpetuating or challenging inequality

Yet the gap between these institutional values and my students' expressed attitudes towards accessible design suggested the principles of these values had not yet been meaningfully integrated into their emerging design consciousness. The manifesto's aspirations existed at the level of course documentation, but students' default assumptions about users, aesthetics, and the purpose of design revealed different, more conventional values at work.

This disconnect is not surprising, as Hooks (1994) argues in *Teaching to Transgress*, education for liberation requires more than stated commitments to justice; it requires pedagogical practices that actively engage students in examining their own assumptions, experiencing alternative perspectives, and developing critical consciousness. The question became: what pedagogical approaches might bridge this gap between articulated course values and students' embodied design practice?

Early Reading: Framing Inclusive Design as Social Justice

Several key texts shaped my initial thinking about inclusive design as a social justice issue rather than merely a technical requirement:

Boys (2014) *Doing Disability Differently,* fundamentally challenged me to think beyond compliance-based accessibility. Boys argues that conventional approaches to "accessible design" often reinforce ableist assumptions by treating disability as a deviation from a norm to be accommodated, rather than recognising the diversity of bodies and minds as central to human experience. She advocates for understanding space, disability, and design as relational and socially constructed, asking not "how do we add accessibility features?" but "how do our spatial practices exclude and include different bodies and experiences?"

Imrie and Hall (2001) *Inclusive Design: Designing and Developing Accessible Environments,* provided historical and theoretical grounding, tracing how built environments have systematically excluded disabled people and arguing for inclusive design as a human rights issue. Their work connects spatial exclusion to broader patterns of social marginalisation, making clear that design decisions are never neutral but always political.

These readings confirmed that addressing my students' resistance to accessible design required more than technical education; it required engaging with questions of social justice, examining assumptions about "normal" bodies, and developing what Imrie and Hall call "moral imagination" in design practice.

Initial Questions and Intentions

Reflecting on student resistance, course values, and this foundational reading, several questions emerged:

- How might I create learning experiences that develop students' empathy and critical consciousness around inclusive design?
- What pedagogical approaches could help students examine their own assumptions and positionality?
- How could I structure learning so that students engage with diverse perspectives and lived experiences, not just abstract principles?
- What role might debate, dialogue, and structured perspective-taking play in developing more inclusive design consciousness?

These questions set the stage for observing colleagues' teaching practice and beginning to formulate my action research approach.

References

Boys, J. (2014) *Doing Disability Differently: An Alternative Handbook on Architecture, Dis/ability and Designing for Everyday Life*. London: Routledge.

Central Saint Martins (2024) *BA (Hons) Architecture Course Overview*. Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/subjects/architecture-spatial-and-interior-design/undergraduate/ba-hons-architecture-csm#course-overview (Accessed: 26 October 2025).

Central Saint Martins (2024) *A Manifesto for Spatial Practices at Central Saint Martins*. Available at: https://www.arts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/190112/Spatial-Practices_Manifesto.pdf (Accessed: 26 October 2025).

Hooks, B. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge.

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