

4. Observations and Interviews



introduction

In this section I analyse the key findings of my observational photographs and interviews. These findings now form a basis for my work and have changed both the physical objects I produce and my understanding of their context. The photographs, taken over three years, have become a valuable resource for my work as they not only reveal types of activity and the objects that encourage them but have allowed me to analyse these situations in terms of access and inclusiveness. They have enabled me to pursue ideas and forms and thus observations of people leaning against a balustrade have led me to photograph the types of balustrade that might be best suited to this activity¹. The interviews, edited transcripts of which can be found in the Appendix (chapter 8), have both reinforced my understanding of my observations and forced me to confront my assumptions and prejudices in a light that is beyond my personal experience. Both the photographs and the interviews suggest themes that can be followed further, reworked and analysed and, as is the nature of such research, will continue to throw up new ideas (and new challenges to existing ideas) to be incorporated into my work.

¹ The photographs in this section deal with activity and objects and I have not included the endless details of form, structure and materials that preoccupy me as a maker. As a result of this research, however, my interest is not in these details for their own sake but the activities they might represent.

4. Observations and Interviews

objects and people

Architectural features and street furniture are nodes for activity



more than sitting

By observing people in public spaces I realised that my research was about leaning, lying, perching lounging - not simply sitting



more than seats

These activities are not confined to seats



behaviour

People feel able to use the environment for their own purposes



4. Observations and Interviews

behaviour continued

'... if it's there and able to be leant on I'll lean on it' (ALG 8.1)

'... if there's a need people will use it, social thing of not doing it, needs must. People are less concerned about what is acceptable, about what people think' (Brian Watchorn 7.3)



This use varies with the weather and the time of day and '... depends on the culture of space' (ALG 8.1)

This culture is important as form alone is unlikely to promote activity - 'don't know if you're allowed to sit' (ALG 8.1)

As uses become less restricted by conventional norms there is an increasing reliance on signs and barriers to control behaviour.



variety

A variety of seating objects and informal arrangement can encourage activity and is desirable for access

‘a variety of arm, left and right for stroke victims – access from both sides’ (ALG 8.1)

‘they’re all the same if there was a choice’ (Brian Watchorn 8.3)



Formal arrangements do not respond to the body and can highlight difference



But variety must be used with care

‘This tactile paving is a pain for me because it’s uneven but I realise the need for it to warn people of danger. You’ve just got to be mindful’. (Lee Harker 8.2)

4. Observations and Interviews

design and flexibility

Some aspects of seats are important to those with disabilities

'I have to have a back because I haven't got the balance' (Lee Harker 8.2)

'The arm needs to be just here' (Brian Watchorn 8.3)



and others are inaccessible

'... to disabled it's neither use nor ornament' (Brian Watchorn 8.3)

Flexibility, and sometimes its ease of movement, can encourage activity and inclusiveness

'Flexibility is very important as an overall concept' (ALG 8.1)



However street furniture that can be moved and temporary objects make the built environment less accessible.

‘I use my mind map of route around fixed obstacles. If a place is too unpredictable I abandon it’ (ALG 8.1)



more than the sitter

Sitting activities involve companions and possessions as well as the sitter

‘Stroke victims or deaf people may prefer companions to sit on one side’ (ALG 8.1)

‘... there’s almost a barrier. You’re there I’m up here. Not as close. Not as connected’
(Brian Watchorn 8.3)



4. Observations and Interviews

environment

The setting and approach to seating is important

'I find textured surfaces difficult to walk on' (Lee Harker 8.2)

'I suppose I could get in round here but you'd have to go up here then close the gate to get through and I don't want to risk all this broken glass' (Brian Watchorn 8.3)



conclusion

An inclusive environment takes account of these different activities, the way they are perceived by society and the way people feel about themselves. It offers a variety of seating opportunities, seat types and seat heights and it makes key provisions for access without highlighting difference.

'... the same model doesn't work for every disability there's no such thing as the perfect toilet or the perfect building' (Lee Harker 8.2)

'... sat here you wouldn't know I was different to anyone else' (Brian Watchorn 8.3)