

# Diary of a Building: Soliciting building users as proxy-researchers

In order to investigate the responsiveness of buildings, and through buildings the responsiveness of local design cultures to ideas of inclusion, creativity needs to be applied to the methods of analysis. One of the challenges of researching building experience is in mapping the temporal nature of these interactions, and how our interactions change at different times of the day, week and year. This paper describes the use of the diary-photograph and the diary-interview method to produce new forms of research evidence based on extended personal narratives and thereby accessing new perspectives of the effect of buildings on human performance. The research tools are placed in the hands of research participants in a paraethnographic approach, largely controlled by the participant. Photographs and written material are produced by participants who are encouraged to be creative and descriptive in detailing their interactions with a building over the course of one week. The investigation takes place in three separate buildings around Dublin City centre. The paper concludes by encouraging the creative imagination of architects towards new methods of investigation that analyse the two-way contingencies between a building's qualities and the inner lives of its users.

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## Introduction

There has been rich methodological development in qualitative research aimed at interpreting aspects of place. This followed Nigel Thrift's despair at the "narrow range of sensate life" registered through traditional qualitative research (Thrift 2000) and his exhortation that researchers interested in exploring aspects of place might broaden their methodological horizons. Partial accounts of the lived experience of place have emerged by combining research tools in broad methodological approaches (Bijoux & Myers 2006; Latham 2003; Latham & McCormack 2007; Morrison 2012b; Sweetman 2009) allowing a triangulation of findings that can reinforce or contest each other. This grouping of research tools includes solicited diaries in conjunction with self-directed photography. Through the solicited diary, the research participant becomes a part of the research process, "chronicling ... the immediately contemporaneous flow of public and private events that are significant to the diarist" (Plummer 2001, p.48). The participant becomes a research partner, or to use Westbrook's term, the "paraethnographer" for the simple reason that "the subject knows what he is talking about, and the ethnographer [researcher] does not" (Westbrook 2008, p.52). The solicited diary is carried out at the request of

a researcher, for the purposes of a particular research project. This allows the research partner to do their own ethnography to a point: it becomes fully ethnographic in partnership with the researcher when it is interpreted and contextualized.

The purpose of the research discussed in this paper was to gather insights about the everyday experience for people in three buildings in Dublin city centre, each with varying degrees of public access. The study focused on gaining an understanding of the cultural specificity of universal design by examining differences between the perspectives of people using the building everyday, and people visiting the buildings. Universal design is defined variously elsewhere (see, for instance O Shea et al. 2014) but for the purposes of this part of the study it was conceptualised as building encounters informed both by participants' embodiment, and their perspectives derived from embodiment. By combining solicited diaries with self-directed photography "different facets of embodied and emotional experience in complex and multi-layered detail" (Morrison 2012b) could be revealed. The project also involved touring studies with a different set of selected participants, alongside quantitative techniques such as paper-based evaluative instruments, but these go beyond the scope of this paper.

The section that follows will discuss solicited diaries and self-directed photographs, referring mainly to examples from geographers where the technique has more of a track record. There will follow a description of how data was collected. The resultant data is then briefly introduced in discussing how effective the methodology was in achieving the intended aims of the research project. The paper will conclude by showing the effectiveness of the approach in understanding the impact of specific buildings and building types on embodiment experience and emotion is tempered by the episodic and restricted access allowed by the research approach.

### Gaining insight into building encounters

The validity of making use of participant accounts in understanding place is the situated nature of that knowledge, imbued with an irreducible reality. By making use of such accounts: *Researchers become less concerned with producing accounts with validity, reliability, and generalizability and more concerned with producing accounts that embody verisimilitude, emotionality, personal responsibility, care, praxis, and plurivocality*" (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis 2004, p.81).

The research potential in the reflective exercise of maintaining a diary such as Zimmermann & Wieder's (1977) Diary/ Diary Interview Method (DDIM), had been resurrected and developed by Alan Latham. This approach invites participants to keep a diary of experiences over time, encourages the participants to consider it as a creative endeavour or a performance in and of itself (Conradson & Latham 2005; Latham 2003; Morrison 2012b). Bijoux and Myers (2006) describe diaries as *"selective recordings or representations of everyday life in process."* The solicited diary is a negotiation between researcher and the proxy researcher. The advantage this provides is access to observations over a period of time that paint a picture of the changing character of place (Bijoux & Myers 2006), and the episodic and staccato nature of the exercise accesses the rich diversity of moods, feelings and emotional contexts of the proxy-researcher (Meth 2003).

The diary method is less familiar as a tool to building researchers, but fills a role in answering a similar call for greater pluralism of qualitative approaches in this field (Dainty

2008). By overlaying diary approaches upon other qualitative and quantitative research tools, a methodology emerges which produces "... *'hard' data for uncovering relationships and 'soft' data for explaining them*" (ibid).

Photography has appeared commonly in anthropological studies as a tool to access less discursive and tacit aspects of people's experience in environments (Sweetman 2009). Self-directed photography facilitates *"a process of creating and representing knowledge that is based on ethnographers' own experiences"* (Pain 2001:18). Photographs in this method are taken by the participants themselves to relate a self-directed narrative. Banks (2001) notes the advantage of photographs in recording fleeting moments and allowing others to see how they looked, as well as recording tacit aspects of experience too complex to be described in a diary format.

The embedding of self-directed photography within diary studies aids in enriching the feedback and breadth of observations from participant studies (Bijoux & Myers 2006; Latham 2003). Bijoux and Meyer (2006) remark on the effectiveness of self-directed photography as an instrument to probe how people react emotionally to different types of building encounters, specifically in documenting how perceived meanings of spaces change meaning when people acquire illness or disability.

Overlaying the results from solicited diaries and photography, and probing the results through summary interviews produces a triangulation of findings. This can provide depth to our understanding of embodied experience, vital for the development of *"crossroad paradigms"* such as universal design (D'Souza 2004). This creates an opportunity for qualitative research to validate – or contest – what might be considered more concrete knowledge forms (e.g., standards and technical documents) traditionally available to architects. More pertinently, this approach can contextualise research and examine not just the effect of architecture on *"othered"* people which is how the diary method is most commonly used (Morrison 2012a). The hypothesis was that this method of examining everyday experience might reveal the implicit role of architecture in creating *"othered"*

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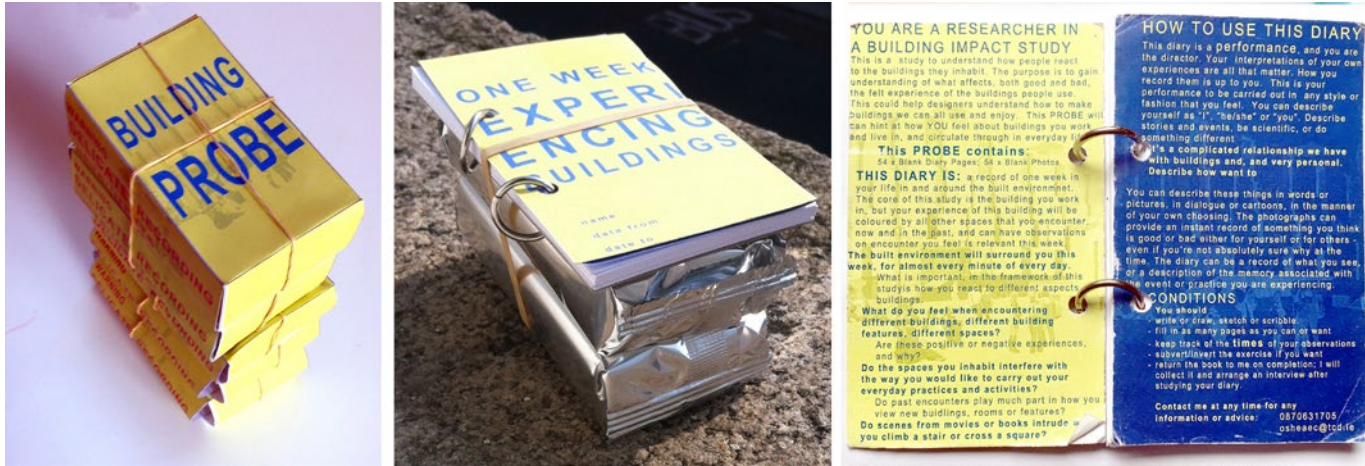


Fig 1 Building Probe used in the Situated Study, showing (a) a pile of Building Probes; (b) the diary and the disposable camera; (c) the instructions inside the diary

circumstances for a wider range of people who would also benefit from design which considered marginalised users.

**Study methodology**

The relationship between prescriptive explanations of universal design and specific cultural studies of negative and marginalising effects of buildings on people have not been studied in great detail. The theoretical underpinnings of universal design has moved gently toward a more explicit appreciation of social and cultural factors (Imrie 2012; O Shea et al. 2014; Steinfeld & Maisel 2012), while there is still a limited methodological exploration of this research area (a notable exception being Heylighen 2012; Heylighen et al. 2013). The aim of this project was to cast a wider methodological net that could interrogate the specificities of universal design, tied to place and to specific temporal contexts.

Solicited diary-making and self-directed photography was carried out with

participants, and follow up semi-structured interviews probed. These allowed a range of perspectives on the same places to be overlaid. The range of methods gave greater scope for participants to express what they wanted to say about the project.

Framing, designing and presenting the exercise to potential research partners is a noted difficulty (Zimmermann & Wieder 1977), particularly a not insignificant level of commitment was being sought. Different researchers have mixed opinions on the timescale for photo-diaries, ranging from three days (Bijoux & Myers 2006) to three weeks (Latham 2003). Trying to entice people to get involved and once involved, of exciting participants about the possibilities of the project, provoked Gaver to develop “Cultural Probes” which alters the interaction between participant and researcher into an exchange (Gaver, Boucher, Pennington, & Walker, 2004; Gaver, Dunne, & Pacenti, 1999). Cultural probes are described as “a designed approach to understanding users that

Table 1 An overview of the Building Probe Instrument participants

Diarist	Study Building	Time in Building	Age range	Self-reported personal factors affecting building comfort	Diary Words/pages	Photos Taken
Eva	Building 1	2-3 years	25-30	450/20	14	
Barry	Building 1	1-2 years	30-40		350/-	10
Ciara	Building 1	1-2 years	30-40		1950/34	4
Liam	Building 2	2-5 years	30-40		1700/28	7
Michael	Building 2	2-5 years	20-30		500/11	26
Catherine	Building 3	10-15 years	30-40		2000/53	9
Damien	Building 3	10-15 years	40-50	Total difficulty hearing	350/11	12
Ken	Building 3	0-1 years	40-50		700/13	13
James	Building 3	5-10 years	40-50		400/19	11

*stressed empathy and engagement*" (Gaver et al., 2004). Probes can include a collection of items, including disposable cameras, and pre-stamped postcards, objects designed to intrigue and involve participants to record fragmentary responses over a period of time.

For this project, a Building Probe was created, as shown in Figure 1. This consisted of a bespoke package containing two items - a hand-made diary and a disposable camera. The diary had a cover clearly inscribed with "One week experiencing a building" and the inside cover contained a set of instructions outlining the aims of the project and guidance on how to use the diary and camera.

### Enrolling participants

Through informal approaches, both direct and indirect, a total of nine participants engaged with the Building Probe instrument across the three buildings. These ranged in age from their early 30's to their late 50's and included 6 men and 3 women. Their duration of experience with the buildings they worked in ranged from 6 months to over 10 years.

After the participants had maintained the diary for at least 5 working days the diary was collected. Following development of the photos and analysis of the text, diarists were asked to meet for a follow-up interview to discuss their experience and to caption each of the photographs. The purpose was to contextualise the observations and the photographs and to fill in gaps and query deeper where required. The diary transcripts, interview notes and photographs were coded. The coding was based broadly on the type of spatial setting being described and the overriding emotions or theme. Where relevant, use was made of affiliations with broad user classifications derived from user evaluation studies or ISO classifications (Froyen 2010; ISO/IEC 2001; Steinfeld 1979). Many of these were prior classifications which aided in allowing easier comparisons between the different strands of the multi-method approach used in the project, but which diverged from a more open grounded theory approach preferred in qualitative analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Within the constraints of the diary study, this approach identified commonalities and differences in and between diarists' observations, and served to separate out specificities of place and generally applicable observations.

### The Diary: Diarist Approach

Significant differences were apparent in how participants used the diary, and the type of voice and relationship they had with the researcher through the diary. Both Michael and Ruth treated the diary as ongoing conversation, speaking directly to the researcher at times, and talking about the tasks they were undertaking in work. Liam, a researcher, referred to his production ("A more productive day! 1000 words" (Liam's diary June 28th)), and constantly wondered if he was providing the data required by the researcher. Liam offered photographs as an apology for a perceived lack of engagement or relevance with the research project:

*Maybe I'm rambling again Eoghan. I hope this stuff can be useful to you. I'll take a photo from my favourite spot ... of a view of the wind through the trees that a photo can't remember (June 28th, 2013).*

Michael and Eva shared a more staccato style, with generally concise observations. For Michael these were often very direct and laden with clear value judgements about the things he saw and perceived about him. *I hate beige It's a horrible colour and the red carpet only makes things worse. I do like the high ceilings of the place though, [it]'s nice (September 4th 2012).*

Michael referred least to the actual study building, but piecing his thoughts together gave a strong sense of how he felt about buildings, and how they "spoke" to him.

Eva and Barry had diary entries which were more concise, Barry in particular summarised observations in single phrases without elaboration. Eva's diary was a series of bullet-pointed lists of observations, keen to make sense of and to be clear about every encounter. For instance, in describing her room her observations were ordered and thorough. Regarding her workspace (Eva, 4th September, 2012):

MY [work] ROOM ...

- Door has no signage WHO'S HERE?
- No signage/Names on Desks. Again who's here?
- lack of storage
- no non-functional wall decoration
- poor seat quality
- heating controls are impossible to access

Within the diaries a number of participants used graphics and imagery to describe what



Fig. 3 The range of geographical locations referenced to in the Touring Interviews and Building Probes

they couldn't verbalise. Liam indicated his patterns of movement in a flow diagram shown in Figure 3. Many diarists used diagrams to relay spatial interconnections, particularly Catherine who illustrated her text with partial building plans. Ciara used sketches to animate how the building functioned or operated during specific episodes, such as in Figure 4.

**Encounters with Embodiment**

In the instructions on the inside cover of the diary, diarists were advised: What is important in the framework of this study is how you respond to different aspects of buildings.

The observations ranged from those of items that might prove generally problematic, to bugbears or moments of joy for the diarists. They also include observations specific to the study building under discussion, that generated very localised cultural conditions.

There were a significant number of examples where embodiment or extended embodiment (responsibility for other people) clearly impacted on the building. Catherine had a fluid descriptive style recounting journeys and events in sequence and noting difficulties such as in Figure 5. Doors and porch areas were unpleasant and difficult because she had to navigate a buggy through them. Similarly, she noted threshold experiences which were negative or more

positive in other locations across Dublin which she had experienced that week.

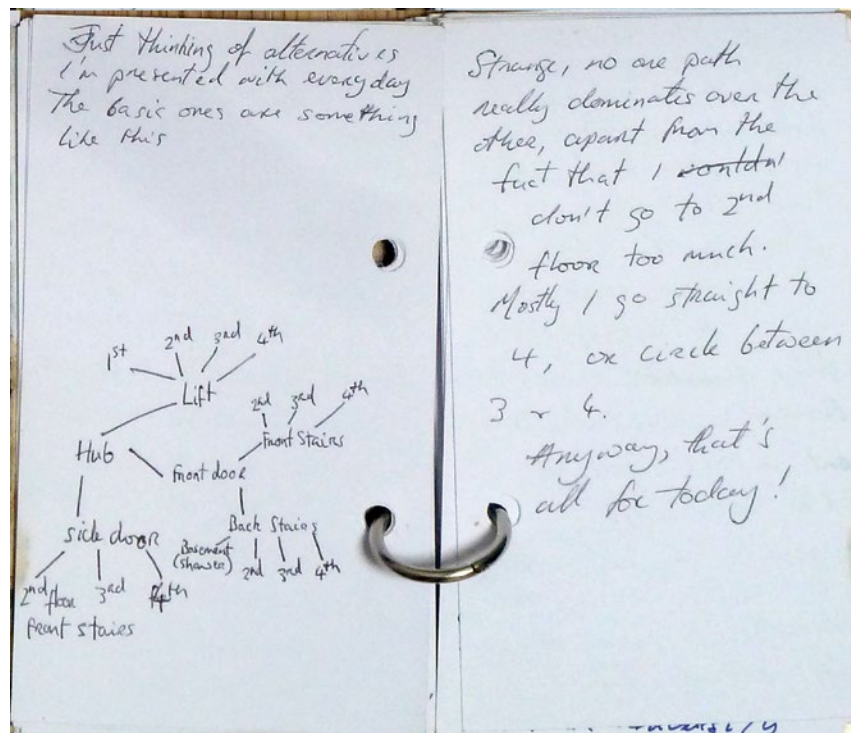
Damien was profoundly deaf, which had a significant influence on his diary entries. Most of his entries discussed the positive or negative impact the building had on him as a deaf person. This was clear from the outset, as his opening sentence read:

*As I am profoundly deaf and use Irish Sign Language daily (in every aspect of life) I use written mode of communication whenever I need to talk to work-colleagues mostly (Damien, November 20th-28th 2013).*

His office space had been considered by his employers and was "deaf-friendly" with low height screens to allow visual warnings of people approaching: "On [a] few occasions I get [a] fright, whenever someone came up to me from behind!". With Damien, captioning the photographs in the follow-up interview had the most significance, as it became the locus of our conversations as illustrated in Figure 6.

Ken and Barry had problems which were the result of other people's behaviour. Ken was unhappy with lighting levels in his workplace noting that "people with their backs to windows have blinds down [to] stop glare on their screens", ensuring that "all lights [are left] on during the day". He similarly found that people close to windows ensured a level of "cross-ventilation ... too cold for some

Fig. 4 Liam's diary illustration of the circulation choices in his workplace (June 26th, 2013)



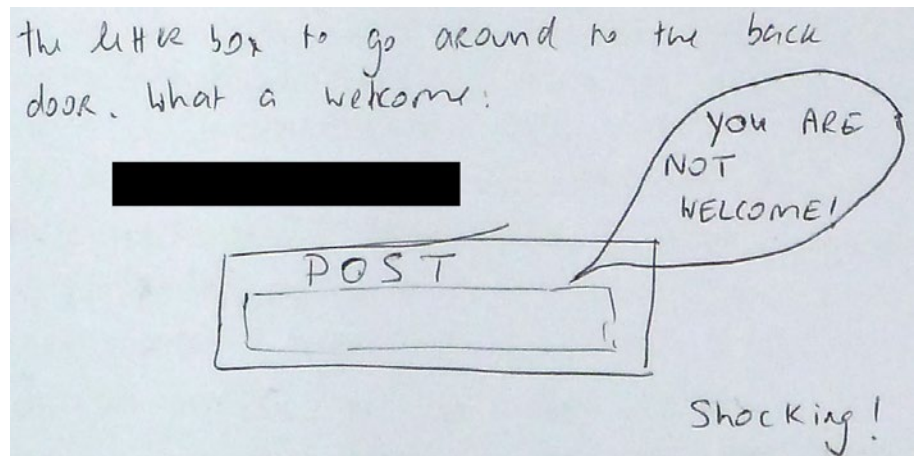
– but just right for those in control of the windows”. Catherine shared a work-area with Ken, but her problems were related to how the building systems were managed as she commonly started work before the heating was turned on.

Darkness and coldness were unsurprisingly common themes throughout the diaries as a backdrop to unpleasant experience. Damien, for instance, noted that darkness could be related to specific aspects of embodiment. He commented in his diary: *The lift doors which are opaque and lift enclosure are not suitable for Deaf users (scary for some especially) elderly customers who fear being trapped inside a lift in the event of a power cut off* (Damien, November 20th-28th 2013).

Damien recalled an elderly deaf friend who had been trapped for some time in a lift: *She tried to scream several times but got no response. She could have had a heart attack!* (ibid).

Ciara’s previous experience with darkness included an extended period on board a ship in the North Atlantic, with almost no daylight available. Her office window did not directly open to outside, but to an atrium which was enough for her to feel an effective connection to outside. Ciara noted during her interview: *It is as nice as it could be because it has that skylight. I still have access to knowing what the weather is doing. And that’s important to me ... and I liked it [at my desk] because it had a blue sky ...*

Darkness also related to the presence of other people. Ciara’s office was in an unlit corridor, so daylight depended on people leaving their office doors open. When people were absent, light was absent too: *Actually – office so quiet – [colleague 1]’s not in & [colleague 2]’s not in. When [colleague 2]’s not in – the corridor is so dark. Don’t like this. (the dark corridor – not [colleague]’s absence!)* (Ciara, 3rd November, 2012). Apart from Damien’s observations, other circumstances of the aural experience were noted by Michael and Liam. Michael noted in his diary about a void in the centre of the building he and Liam worked in: *The hole in the floor lets one hear people talking in the foyer quite clearly. Sometimes makes it seem there are more people on this floor. Which can be disconcerting* (Michael, September 6th 2012).



Liam repeats this, mentioning in his interview: *There is a sense that every single other person on the floor can hear you and perhaps even people on other floors because they are connected, and you hear people coming in all the time and you never know whether someone is on the same floor as you or the second floor or the first floor because the sound carries so clearly.* (Liam, June 24th 2013).

Fig. 5 Catherine’s description of entering her workplace in the morning (November 2013)

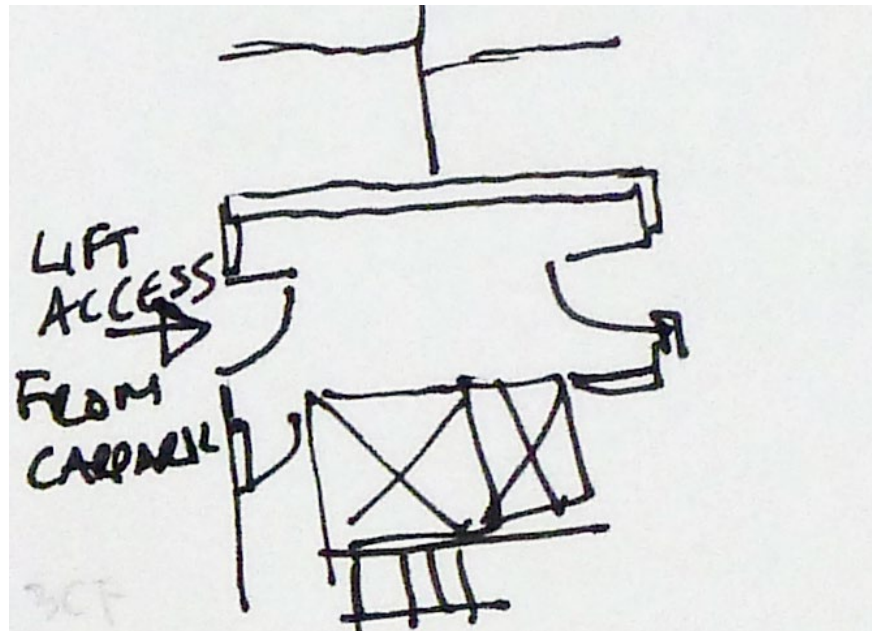
For Liam this meant that he always spoke while in this space as though performing and as if his words could always be overheard. This contrasts with his interview observation of his desk “[being here] almost feels like backstage”. The quiet was something which struck him at times: *Now is my favourite time in time .... It’s quiet, not so much noise from Grafton Street, light is gentler. I’ll take a photo, maybe that will catch it...* (Liam, June 24th 2013).

#### Emotional landscapes

Repeatedly, participant’s experience of the building were found to relate to their own lifespace or histories. Ciara’s boat experience meant any hint of daylight was enough, and daylight and its source was a central theme in her writing. For Barry, it was about a tactile experience. Barry’s workplace was a converted 19th century house, with little remaining apart from the handrail. For him it warmed him to the building because of an association: *lovely bannister, grans house, warm & homely – a nice touch in an office environment* (Barry, June 15th 2012).

A variety of factors indicated diarists’ judgement of whether a space was good or bad, or whether it was nice to be in or not. These were not confined to purely functional factors, but also, unsurprisingly, to emotional responses. Where functional factors intruded, greater weight was placed on circumstances where people were forced into awkward

Fig. 6 Catherine's description of entering her workplace in the morning (November 2013)



social interaction, or were automatically forced into an alternative, and by inference, a lesser experience of a building. Loving the building and loving work was clearly linked in Catherine's diary: *I love working in my building – the atrium space makes me happy when I walk into every morning. I enjoy working in a large building with open spaces* (Catherine, November 21st, 2013).

The presence of specific individuals in authority in specific areas of a building was noted in four of the nine diaries as having a negative effect when passing through that zone.

The quest to inhabit these spaces of authority was a theme explored by Liam: But spaces can also make us want to avoid them. The procrastinator wants to avoid tension, the moment of conflict that is the blank page. Spaces too are conflictual - "Take you a course, get you a place". We fight for places, to dominate space. To avoid work is to avoid fight for place (Liam, 25th of June 2013) His current workplace was for him one that avoided this issue, as less senior individuals inhabited the most beautiful spaces as he saw them. Michael, who worked in the same building, had a different point of view. The backstage aspect of the building that he was forced into, which was a back-stair that led to toilets, was also the place for private phone calls and the route to photocopiers. This space contrasted strikingly with the rest of the building: *... by contrast, the back stairs is fucking horrible. Cramped, green floor, bare cement walls make it feel like a cold industrial*

*space rather than a[n] intellectual research building. There's even a ladder just left at the top for god's sake! It wouldn't be so bad except that's where the toilets are so you have to use that stairs.* (Michael, September 3rd, 2012).

This was linked to the idea of affiliation, and for Michael this space for the employees in the building reflected their relative importance. This theme of affiliation was particularly apparent in Eva's diary. In her interview, Eva felt the impression the entrance area to the building made on people reflected on her, noting that there was no sense of what was going on in the building:

*I feel it's really bad that I'm associated with this bad impression that visitors get ... I mean that first impressions are one of these things that they're so basic, they're so easy to get them right, you do them once and you never have to think about them again... That's what our, essentially that's what our building is saying about us, that we have no organization skills and we don't give a damn about you.*

### Discussion

This study found the three methods provided cross-fertilisation of observations, particularly marking interesting spots to dig deeper into during the interview. It similarly found that providing a suite of methods allowed people to choose the focus of their expression. Barry and James spoke most directly through the photos, with the diaries providing a further description of the images they took, while Ciara and Liam in particular concentrated on the diary with Catherine



Fig. 7 Damien's photograph on an escape stair in his workplace, including his own caption and a written conversation with the researcher

making extensive use of sketches and diagrams. This is a conclusion not alluded to by either Latham or Bijoux and Myer, but is coincident with UD practices in pedagogy (Dolmage 2005).

The use of multitude perspectives, sometimes contradictory, aligns with a suite of semantic evaluation theories. In particular, the findings confirm Norberg-Schultz (1980) and Ingold's (2002) phenomenological approaches which root people's relationships with buildings in personal experience, and Leach's (2005) theory of buildings as places that foster belonging. The role of embodiment in defining building experience which emerged in the findings also supports Lefebvre's (1995) view of the body as the chief interpreter of space, and with the centrality of the body for Thrift (2008) (amongst a cohort of social practice theorists). It also confirms the view proposed by Reckwitz (2002) - and used as the basis of analysis through methods employed by Latham (2003) - that practically relevant knowledge can be generated both from observing how bodies perform, and from asking people to analyse their own bodily performance, and to draw theories and conclusions upon these performances. Self-analysis is particularly relevant in the face of "invisible disabilities" (Clair et al. 2005), where vulnerability, discomfort or impairment are often un-seeable, or intentionally hidden as a strategy to preserve dignity.

### Conclusion

Much like many geographical investigations that seek to "understand the movement through the spaces of everyday life" (Bijoux & Myers 2006), understanding the dynamics of people's relationships with buildings requires methods that can move with the research partners. The methods described in this paper are mobile and allowed research participants to self-determine how the research was to be carried out and presented. There is a space offered by the diary and self-directed photographs which enables reflection and an exploration of the context of the experiences. The interaction between space and person may be deconstructed and the aspects of lived experience and building context understood more fully. In combination with the interview, it allowed areas recorded but not thought about to be unpacked and considered. For research disciplines such as universal design which are fundamentally focused on the interrelationship between person and spatial articulation, it can produce new possibilities for understanding and reproducing positive spatial experience through design strategies. Time commitment was assumed to be a central difficulty in attracting people to take part in the study. Once on board, there seemed to be a genuine interest, although Barry and Eva, whose follow-up interviews took place a number of weeks after the diary exercise, admitted that the awareness the study fostered diminished almost

immediately afterwards. Greater reward for participation is one potential solution.

Ultimately, the results are not definitive or ordered, originating as they do in the blurred edges of people's descriptive narratives. These are partial "snapshot" accounts of insider accounts which show the innate creativity required in everyday living, and the multiple characters and roles people hint at "as they strive to record an ever-changing present" (Plummer 2001, p.48). This type of methodological pluralism will, it is hoped, encourage a recognition of different ways of knowing amongst architects and researchers in this area.