idea journal

fictions, fantasies, and fabulations: imagining other interior worlds

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While the world reels, reconfigures, and recovers from the drama and trauma of 2020, wishing to thwart the effects of grief and comprehend what was once incomprehensible, there is all good reason to turn our imagination to ‘what ifs’, dreams, and other speculations as an antidote to hopelessness. This issue, Fictions, Fantasies, and Fabulations, calls for contributions that consider the unlikely, improbable, or downright impossible in spatial design. In recent history, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations have offered productive opposition to the rampant instrumentality of pragmatism and functional planning. Their impact has instilled optimism, sparked alternative visions, and been sites of countless critiques of conformity and the status quo. Loosely defined impulses towards the unrealisable and the most illogical of things approached in the most logical of ways have led to unparalleled episodes of creativity in drawings, poems, and material production. From Piranesi, Peter Greenaway, Kurt Schwitters, Dora Maar, Hans Op de Beeck, Ursula Le Guinn, John Hejduk, to Daniel Libeskind, explorations of the impossible have led to new interpretative frontiers that move the limits of interiority and spatial practices. Lest we forget or become complacent with the contributory and often unrecognised impact of contemporary social media, advertisement, and technological surveillance that continues to shape interior worlds, experiences, and values. In many ways, there is as much focus on unpacking, making sense of, and disproving the dangerous impacts of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations as there is on setting the scene for dreams and magical realities.

This issue recognises the complex story of fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial design, not as counter-productive forces, but as the necessary counter-balances that offer liberty from convention, propriety, and rational assumptions about behaviour, space, time, and material — the core elements of interior worlds. Far from retreating into solipsistic escapism, fictions, fantasies, and fabulations serve as crucial sites for speculative invention, futuring, and critical reflection. Resistant to the reductive inertia of pragmatism, these generative properties reign in that mercurial shadow world of meaning and value not directly associated with cause and effect.

This call for papers and projects is intended to frame an open examination and exploration of the fictions, fantasies, and fabulations in spatial and interior practices. It prompts us to draw, write, perform, and record the critical edge of the unrealisable in an era that has literally experienced the limits of reason. As described by poet Franny Choi, there is no more time for poetry without stakes because ‘people are literally dying’. There is no more time for creative practices that don’t ask questions that we ‘truly don’t know the answer to’. Choi’s sentiments air a sense of urgency for relevance as much as they point to the value and agency of poetic meaning and making in artistic, spatial, and interior practices.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=PLYUdgQtOLXIc7HW_lc3nBH7VNNvT5hDTA&v=iwoS-CB7k8&ab_channel=PBSNewsHour
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imagining a more inclusive world: notes on difference, disability, and space in *the shape of water*

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abstract

Fiction can stimulate empathy toward others by deepening sensitivity to difference. Pragmatist philosophers like Richard Rorty and John Dewey consider imaginative capacity the root of empathy and promote fiction as a source of ethical insight. Understanding others who are different is fundamental to designing more inclusive spaces. Based on these connections, we explore how *The Shape of Water* illuminates the current discourse on inclusive design, particularly how design practices influence encounters between and among diverse bodies and environments. *The Shape of Water* is a non-trivial, award-winning, commercial film about the inter-species romance between a mute janitor, Elisa Esposito, who works in a top-secret, 1960s military research facility, and her love interest, the captive Amphibian Man, a tall, green, biped, bi-respiratory humanoid. We explore the film’s ethos as a speculative (even magic) ‘realm’ in which excluded individuals find agency and power in their very marginalisation and exclusion. This is most evident in its depictions of mutism and non-normative communication, which inspire fundamental reformulations of the nature of otherness and disability in relation to the material environment. We address both the film’s narrative action and its scenography, with interest in how production design embodies the protagonists’ exclusion and agency. *The Shape of Water* illuminates the discourse on inclusive design in multiple respects. First, through narrative depiction of individuals’ interactions and lives, it demonstrates how divisions between ‘us’ and ‘them’ materialise in objects and spaces, and how differences considered a deficit in one context may manifest as an advantage in another. Second, through the agency of magical realism, the film invites us to explore the potential of spaces that accommodate such a/symmetry through environmental hybridity. Finally, while social and material environments are are known to disable or enable, *The Shape of Water* represents how they interact, highlighting the role of everyday design(ers) in making spaces more inclusive.

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disability, ethics, magical realism, inclusive design, otherness
beginning in the middle

The way he looks at me. He doesn’t know what I lack … Or how I am incomplete. He just sees me for what I am. As I am. And he is happy to see me, every time. Every day.

— Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor (2016)

Midway through *The Shape of Water*, the film’s chief protagonist, Elisa Esposito, a mute woman in her early thirties, desperately signs to her next-door neighbour and friend, Giles, a gay, lovelorn commercial artist, who translates as she gestures. Elisa begs Giles to understand that her prospective lover, Amphibian Man, sees her as she really is, free from the prejudicial assumptions that often accompany perceptions of people unable to speak. Difference is the crux of this unconventional love. Strictly speaking, Amphibian Man is not human, but rather a sentient, river-dwelling humanoid, held captive in a top-secret 1960s US military research facility, where Elisa works as a janitor.

The romance between Elisa and Amphibian Man is the love story at the heart of Guillermo del Toro’s film. Based on a screenplay he co-authored with Vanessa Taylor, *The Shape of Water* earned nominations for thirteen Academy Awards, winning Oscars in four categories: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Original Score, and Best Production Design.

The film has attracted interest from scholars in various academic domains, not least because of its representation of otherness and disability. While this representation is also what drew us to *The Shape of Water*, our analysis focuses on what the film can teach us about designing more inclusive spaces.

In this work-in-progress, we explore the ethos of *The Shape of Water* as a speculative ‘realm’ in which excluded individuals — mute, gay, black, poor — find agency and power in their very marginalisation and exclusion. Its depictions of mutism and non-normative communication inspire fundamental reformulations of the nature of otherness and disability in relation to the material environment. Our analysis therefore addresses both the film’s narrative action and the diverse spaces that accommodate it, with attention to how the director crafts production design to reflect the protagonists’ exclusion and agency. We further explore how the film illuminates current discourse on inclusive design, particularly the way today’s design practices influence the encounter between and among diverse bodies and environments.

After sketching the background of our analysis, we highlight three themes: a/symmetry, hybridity, and everyday design; and we connect these themes to selected real-world artefacts and spaces.
otherness, fiction, and inclusive design
Together, Elisa and Amphibian Man constitute what legal scholar Aviam Soifer calls ‘a category of individuals much feared, manipulated, and discriminated against throughout our history’. Problems of discrimination, exclusion, and inequity involve a diverse spectrum of perceived differences that people regard negatively. Besides bodily differences, western society identifies differences related to age, class, education, employment, gender, health, and race, but problematises only some of their features. For example, in the case of human beings, the inability to see ultra-violet light is considered neither a lack nor a difference worth anyone’s concern. The inability to speak, however, represents a noticeable, often exclusionary deficiency — at least among speaking people. Such negatively valued differences form the basis of ‘othering’, that is, the establishment of divisions between an ‘us’ and a ‘them’.

Although established by people, such divisions are materialised in the fabric of objects, spaces, and buildings. When architects or other designers anticipate future use, too often they build deeply habituated assumptions or under-examined hypotheses into the materiality of their designs, frequently based on their own day-to-day experiences and implicit aesthetic bias. The last fifty years have seen important efforts to encode rights to accessibility in policies that govern architecture and other design domains.

Yet, studies show that even well-considered legislative measures are insufficient to produce truly inclusive environments. On the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), American architect Karen Braitmayer pointed out that an architect’s or designer’s compliance with the letter of the ADA is not the same as their internalisation of its civil rights goals. We align with Braitmayer’s argument that what remains for architecture is ‘to lift itself into the next realm’.

Of equal value to existing policy and social theory is insight offered by ethical and moral references articulated through fiction — novels, poetry, plays, and film. American philosopher Richard Rorty advocates for novels based on their unique power to render alternative realities without the encumbrance of specialised academic vocabularies and parochialism. ‘Something that has actually worked’ to eliminate ‘the cruelty to which human communities treat one another,’ Rorty argues, ‘is identification across boundaries by imaginative projection.’ He builds upon the work of philosopher John Dewey, who considered imaginative capacity the root of empathy. Dewey used the terms interchangeably, calling imagination empathic projection and defining empathy as ‘entering by imagination into the situations of others.’
Research in psychology suggests that engaging with fiction indeed may help navigate the real social world by improving one’s social-cognitive ability. Meta-analyses of studies in this area show that frequent fiction reading not only correlates with higher scores on empathy and theory of mind — the ability to think about others’ minds — but causally improves social-cognitive performance. Engaging in fiction’s simulative experiences can facilitate understanding others who are different and can augment people’s capacity for empathy and social inference.

Understanding others who are different is fundamental to inclusive design. Although inclusive design thinking has evolved differently in different contexts, the common ambition is to accommodate the widest range of people possible. According to Professor of Engineering Design P. John Clarkson and Professor of Inclusive Design Roger Coleman, this ambition derives from two premises: first, ‘there is such considerable diversity in mental and physical capability both across the population and over the length of the life-course that the association of “normality” with “able-bodiedness” is neither accurate nor acceptable’; second, ‘disability arises from interactions with the surrounding environment that are amenable to design and structural interventions, and not inherently from capability levels, health status, or associated degrees of impairment.’

The latter premise resonates with contemporary understandings of disability. Whereas traditional conceptions consider disability as an individual physiological disorder, situated in a person’s body, more recent social-relational models conceptually distinguish between impairment — a bodily dysfunction — and disability, which is socially constructed on top of that. By placing the explanation of its changing character in the organisation of the society in which it is found, including the spaces shaping that organisation, these models recognise the two-way relationship between a disabled person and their socio-material environment. Conceiving disability not as an attribute either of a person or environment but as an effect implies a shift from static to dynamic understanding: ‘disabled is not something one is, but something one becomes.’

More recently, inclusive design has evolved towards a wider understanding of diversity beyond age and ability, including aspects related to cultural and social differences; gender; sexuality; and their varied intersections. Together, these developments in the scholarship on human diversity have progressively shifted the focus in inclusive design ‘from THEM—the elderly and disabled in academic parlance—to the US.’ It is this shift that forms the background for our analysis of *The Shape of Water.*
Imagining a More Inclusive World: Notes on Difference, Disability, and Space in *The Shape of Water*

Ann Heylighen and Daniel S. Friedman

**a/symmetry**

*zich als een vis in het water voelen*

[feel like a fish in water]

be in one's element, feel (perfectly) at home

*like a fish out of water*

als een vis op het droge, niet in zijn element

[like a fish out of water, not in one's element]

— van Dale (2022)

In *The Shape of Water*'s screenplay, del Toro and Taylor introduce inter-species relationships to familiar asymmetries of power characteristic of othering. Amphibian Man (Doug Jones) is a towering, green, biped, bi-respiratory humanoid, worshipped by indigenous Amazonian tribes as a god. He possesses supernatural abilities, including the power to heal grievous wounds, restore hair, and raise the dead by touch. He is kidnapped by Richard Strickland (Michael Shannon), a sadistic, cattle prod-wielding Army intelligence officer, whose superior, General Hoyt (Nick Searcy), orders a vivisection against the advice of Dr Robert Hoffstetler (Michael Stuhlbarg), a lab scientist who is secretly a Soviet spy. Elisa Esposito (Sally Hawkins), a lonely, lowly, mute janitor with mysterious, gill-like scars on either side of her throat, falls in love with Amphibian Man. She succeeds in freeing him, thanks to the assistance of her gay next-door neighbour, Giles (Richard Jenkins), and her protective black co-worker, Zelda Fuller (Octavia Spencer). What excludes Elisa, Giles, and Zelda in their work and homelife — ableism, racism, sexism, and homophobia — also strengthens their courage and solidarity. Amphibian Man's supernatural abilities and the narrative action that flow from his captivity and liberation frame an alternative ethics of immediate relevance to contemporary realities beyond cinema, to which del Toro makes continual reference through poetic layering and skilful juxtaposition of speech, imagery, history, and popular culture.

**communication**

But you cannot use persuasion if you cannot talk. No imagination, no language. No linguistic change, no moral or intellectual progress.


*The Shape of Water* shows that attributes negatively valued in one context may be positively valued in another, and vice versa. For example, among the many representations of 'otherness' in the film — class, gender, race, sexual orientation — the one that drives the central storyline is the inability to speak. Elisa's mutism is generally considered to be a deficit; even her trusted neighbour Giles
offhandedly notes, ‘my best friend is not much of a ... conversationalist’. Yet within the filmic universe of Del Toro’s magical realism, her mutism becomes a kind of super-ability, an ability that ‘exceeds a norm’. Having adapted effective and expressive methods of alternative communication, Elisa exhibits sensitivities and insights that transcend conventional speech. She engages Amphibian Man through signing, enriched with a ‘syntax’ of fluid gestures and actions, eye contact, facial expressions, music, and dance.

From her first encounter with Amphibian Man, Elisa seems transfixed by the sounds emanating from the steel-reinforced tank that staff deliver to the research facility. She establishes trust by setting hard-boiled eggs on the edge of the small laboratory pool, where his captors keep him chained. Amphibian Man shyly takes the eggs, then quickly learns from Elisa how to sign them, along with signs denoting the music she plays for him on her portable turntable. Their correspondence continues and intensifies. Elisa brings yet more records and more eggs, signing back and forth with Amphibian Man, inviting him to choose among the albums she presents to him; soon they respectively dance and swim in happy unison to the sounds of Benny Goodman’s ‘Moonglow’. Elisa presses her open hand against the glass; Amphibian Man replies in kind. ‘Her smile turns wistful,’ the screenplay notes. ‘She keeps her hand there. Leans her forehead against the glass’, Amphibian Man responds by activating and changing the colour of his phosphorescent, piscine markings.

Unbeknown to Elisa and Amphibian Man, Dr Hoffstetter observes their romantic exchange while hiding in the shadows of the lab. Caught off-guard by their effortless communication, he recognises Amphibian Man’s extraordinary, even ‘human’ qualities. Hoffstetter excitedly reports to his handlers: ‘this creature ... may be able to communicate with us ... I have reason to believe,’ he adds, that Amphibian Man ‘is intelligent. It ... responds to language [and] to music.’ Later, in his role as lab scientist, he objects to the creature’s vivisection. ‘Sir,’ he says to General Hoyt, ‘you cannot — under any circumstances — kill this creature. You cannot’; and to Strickland, the film’s principal antagonist, he pleads, ‘I don’t want an intricate, beautiful thing destroyed. The creature — and I am certain of this — is intelligent. Capable of language, of understanding — of emotions.’

accommodation
Besides Elisa’s interaction with Amphibian Man — the social context — the material context likewise affects what constitutes a significant lack. In this connection, disabilities studies scholar Alison Wilde and co-authors wonder: ‘Is “mutism” Elisa’s most significant impairment or is it her inability to breathe under-water?’ As they point out, the three scars on each side of her neck suggest that her natural home may have been aquatic. When Strickland interviews Zelda and Elisa, he inquires about Elisa’s name: ‘Doesn’t Esposito mean “Orphan”?’ Zelda replies, ‘They found her — by the river — in the water’ Moreover, Elisa’s melancholic demeanour and outsider status suggest
that, in her human life, she is literally (like Amphibian Man) ‘a fish out of water.’ Finally, while Amphibian Man makes no attempt to cure Elisa of her mutism, during the film’s violent and tender conclusion, as they float upright in the water, the touch of his webbed palm heals her gunshot wound and opens her scars to reveal the gills she needs for her aquatic ‘rebirth.’

Clearly, the American and Soviet military personnel in the story regard Amphibian Man as a sub-human ‘monster.’ As creative writer Alberta Natasia Adji notes, ‘monsters’ represent a favoured topos in del Toro’s filmmaking — the Hellboy franchise, Pan’s Labyrinth, The Devil’s Backbone, Pacific Rim, among others. The word ‘monster’ derives from the Old French, mostre: ‘prodigy, marvel’; and earlier, by antiphrasis, ‘something extraordinary or unnatural; an amazing event or occurrence,’ evolving only later into the meanings ‘disfigured person’ and ‘misshapen being.’ Its current definition denotes ‘a mythical creature that is part animal and part human, or combines elements of two or more animal forms, and is frequently of great size and ferocious appearance’; more generally, it means ‘any imaginary creature that is large, ugly, and frightening.’ And yet its Indo-European root, men-, etymologically connects it to the word ‘demonstrate,’ which means ‘to show clearly [and] deliberately,’ from the Latin monstrare, ‘to show,’ from monstrum, ‘divine portent,’ from monere, ‘to warn, advise,’ arguably the meaning with the deepest history and structure, and greatest relevance to del Toro’s use of ‘monsters’ as thematic tropes.

The fact that material contexts affect what constitutes a significant lack also characterises the mise-en-scène of The Shape of Water, which unfolds during the peak of US/Soviet military tensions in the 1960s. At that time aerospace research and nuclear proliferation were strategically indistinguishable. To extrapolate the effects of weightlessness on human physiology, the US and Soviet Union launched animals (dogs, monkeys, chimps) into orbit. The film’s storyline builds on the aggressive military competition over control of Amphibian Man. Once fully understood, the creature’s ability to alternate between two separate breathing mechanisms represents a strategic advantage. General Hoyt orders Strickland to expedite a vivisection: on terra firma Amphibian Man is no more than a lab rat; in outer space he is a military ‘asset.’

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hybrid beings, hybrid spaces

FADE IN:

INT. ELISA’S APARTMENT / RIVER FOOTAGE – NIGHT.

We float at the bottom of a river.

Surrounded by water

Fish swim away.

Debris floating in the water –

And, then, a lamp floats by –

A coffee pot –

A shoe.

— Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor (2016)

To the floating lamp, coffee pot, and shoe, the opening scene of del Toro’s final cut adds end tables, dining chairs, a clock, a watch, and an antique daybed. Above these objects floats the slumbering Elisa, in repose under a marbled shaft of light, whose hair behaves as though underwater but whose pillow, which she tenderly hugs, behaves ‘normally’, that is, subject to the gravity of its terrestrial context. We find ourselves adrift in the depths of a hypnopompic hallucination, the type of vivid dreams human beings experience when transitioning from sleep to consciousness. As she and the objects surrounding her slowly descend into their ‘normal’ terrestrial configuration, del Toro’s oneirically underwater environment gives way to a conventional apartment, which we soon learn occupies an old storeroom originally designed for the aging movie palace immediately below. The waking narrative begins when Elisa’s alarm clock sounds, followed almost immediately by sirens wailing outside her apartment window, which glows red as fire trucks rumble past along the street below. Before leaving her makeshift apartment for work, Elisa boils some eggs, fills her tub to the brim, sets an egg-shaped timer, disrobes, slips into the bath water, then ‘goes to work on herself, gently, slowly’.
In this opening scene, which foretells the trans-zoomorphic, inter-species love story about to unfold, del Toro skilfully introduces the ‘magically real’ interior atmosphere of the story, including and especially Elisa’s ‘otherworldly’ character and emotional motives. For the film’s sets and scenes, he creates ‘monstrous spaces,’ spaces that both show and warn. The spaces of *The Shape of Water* are therefore hybrid in nature, like its principal protagonists, who possess neither purely aquatic nor purely terrestrial bodies; rather, they are supernatural beings who inhabit supernatural space by virtue of supernatural physiology, perception, and sensoria. Del Toro synthesises the properties of one environmental regime with the properties of the other. In the spirit of magical realism, he does not add them together or integrate them so much as reconceptualise them as a continuity within the protagonist’s unconstrained subconscious. Her dreams and memories seem to suggest a prior incarnation, a deeper truth about her mutism, the origins of the scars on either side of her neck, and her true identity.

The supernatural hybridity of the opening scene contrasts sharply with the top-secret military facility near Baltimore’s industrial waterfront where Elisa works, which del Toro renders as an oppressive, almost carceral space. Later, at work, in the course of their janitorial duties, Zelda and Elisa enter a laboratory concealed by what the screenplay describes as a ‘slaughterhouse-like’ door marked ‘T-4’; the lab is crowded with military personnel, scientists, and technicians, busy servicing the room’s massive machinery, tanks, pools, industrial pipes and ducts, and related hydrological infrastructure. As Wilde et al. note, ‘T-4’ is also the name of a notorious WWII Nazi campaign resulting in the institutionalized murder of over 250,000 physically or mentally impaired German citizens, through a programme of involuntary ‘euthanasia,’ precursor to the unimaginable holocaust soon to follow.
everyday design

GILES.

[...] There’s nothing we can do. What are we, Elisa? You and I? Nothing. What can we do? Nothing.

(beat)

And – I am sorry. But it is not even human.

She trembles in rage as she signs. Subtitled: ‘If we don’t do something … Neither are we.’

— Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor (2016)

So far, we have highlighted how del Toro illustrates the relationship between othering and material context, e.g., aquatic versus terrestrial, orbital versus grounded environments; and how he employs imaginative set design to accommodate the protagonists’ otherness/hybridity, e.g., by reconceptualising commonplace environmental regimes in the dreamlike opening scene. Besides demonstrating the force of his own imagination, however, del Toro also shows the agency and creative power of thoughtful characters in this connection: he shows how in performing day-to-day activities and fulfilling social roles the social and the material interact.

Del Toro and Taylor populate The Shape of Water with vivid examples of interdependent relationships, individuals taking care of each other regardless of whether they have an ‘impairment.’ Indeed, the film’s stereotypical antagonists, brutes and bigots, target Zelda for being black, Giles for being gay, and Elisa for being mute; yet courage, interdependency, and kind-heartedness prevail. Consider how Zelda translates Elisa’s sign language: ‘I answer mostly, on account that she can’t talk,’ she explains to Strickland; or how she takes care of her husband: ‘Then I get home and I make him breakfast. Bacon and eggs and buttered toast. I butter the man’s toast, Elisa. Both sides — As if he were a child.’ Likewise, Elisa tends to the needs of Giles as though he were a relative or spouse. ‘Oh, darling child,’ Giles says, when she brings him a plate of food. ‘I’d waste away to nothing without you looking after me. I am the proverbial starving artist am I not?’

Of particular significance for inclusive design, however, is how individuals take care of each other as ‘everyday designers’ of their material environment. While design is traditionally associated with professional designers, design scholars increasingly note that design does not stop when an object, space, or building leaves the drawing board; people creatively act upon objects and environments to adapt, appropriate, and redesign them or, alternatively, repair, repurpose, and resource them. In doing so, they engage in ongoing design through use.
A form of ‘everyday design’ that plays a central role in *The Shape of Water* is the practice of cleaning. The janitor (from the Latin *janua*, door, entrance) is the caretaker of the building, who guards portals and surfaces against the effects of use — dirt, dust, grime, wear and tear. Janitors stand at the outside of activities; their duty is to sweep the floor and care for the ground. Strictly speaking, janitorial work is perpetual. We call janitors and the kind of work they do ‘maintenance’ (from the Latin *manure tenere*, to hold in one’s hands). Roof leak? Call maintenance. Lost keys? Find the janitor. True to form, it is Elisa who finds Strickland’s two severed fingers floating among the suds of the bucket of water she uses to douse the blood-soaked floor of T-4, after Strickland’s continuing attempt to torture Amphibian Man backfires.

It should come as no surprise that del Toro elevates a janitor and her co-worker to the status of heroes, who by skill and cunning subvert Strickland’s and Hoyt’s power. Maintenance presupposes continuation and sustenance. Janitorial work derives from acts of cultivation, like soil preparation, plant care, or farming (the word ‘culture’ comes from the word meaning ‘to cultivate,’ not unlike the way Elisa uses eggs to cultivate trust with Amphibian Man). Del Toro and Taylor express the irony of this inversion of power in a key dialogue. Toward the film’s conclusion, when Hoffstetler lies dying, shot by his own comrades, Strickland tortures him for the names of the ‘strike team’ that helped Amphibian Man escape. ‘Names! Ranks! Now!’ Strickland brutally commands; Hoffstetler laughs through his pain in reply: ‘No names, no ranks, they … they just clean.’ As literary scholar Michel de Certeau notes, ‘Tales and legends [are *repertories of the schema of action*] . . . The formality of everyday practices is indicated in these tales, which frequently reverse the relationships of power and, like the stories of miracles, ensure the victory of the unfortunate in a fabulous, utopian space. This space protects the weapons of the weak against the reality of the established order . . . [T]hese “fabulous” stories offer their audience a repertory of tactics for future use.’

Cleaning springs from clearing. Cleaning therefore re-enacts a return to beginnings, the recovery of a prior or original condition, which resonates with the mystery of Elisa’s ‘gills.’ Each night the maintenance crew comes in, clears away the sediment of the day’s activity — dust, debris, trash, smudges, or, in the case of *The Shape of Water*, flesh and blood — and restores or renews the building, noting any items for replacement or repair. Few activities embody architecture’s theoretical origins and responsibilities more fundamentally than everyday acts of clearing and beginning anew.

Beyond their work as janitors, the film’s central characters engage in everyday design by using and transforming objects and environments in ways not necessarily
intended by their (professional) designers. A phone becomes usable for Elisa thanks to Zelda's inventiveness: ‘Elisa, honey, you gotta listen to me, make a sound in the phone if you can hear....’66 The terrestrial environment becomes liveable for Amphibian Man thanks to Elisa, who (with the help of others) adjusts it so generously to his needs. She keeps the water in the bathtub at 75 to 85 percent salinity and adds algae to the bathwater every three days as instructed by Hoffstetler, who has been transformed after secretly witnessing the love expressed between Elisa and Amphibian Man. Elisa eventually designs a way to temporarily help Amphibian Man by sealing the door and filling her entire bathroom with water:

The tub's filling up.
The creature watches.

She opens and closes the HOT/COLD faucet. Tests the water.

She takes the box of algae that Hoffstetler gave her. She opens the box. She gets an idea. Smiles and looks around the bathroom.

– opens the faucet on the sink.

The sink overflows

She takes the towels – sealing the cracks – and uses a towel to stuff the space between the door and the floor. The water continues to run – [...]

Elisa is floating, naked, next to the Amphibian Man – now the entire BATHROOM is immersed in water.

She embraces him – Eyes closed, feeling him underneath her and the water on her face. His markings move rhythmically like a melody.

She intakes and holds.

As the water goes above her head.

They float underwater. Contemplating each other.

— Guillermo del Toro and Vanessa Taylor (2016)67
navigating the real world

The insight that othering materialises in architecture and interior design, and likewise that the material environment can be disabling or enabling, are not new: social-relational models of disability have been out there for several decades. What *The Shape of Water* adds, however, is first a different way of communicating these insights, that is, through narrative depiction of people’s (and other individuals’) interactions and lives. Second, while scholarship on othering argues that differences considered a deficit in one context may be an advantage in another, this film imagines how this may be the case — see, for example, del Toro’s aforementioned representation of aquatic versus terrestrial environments. Finally, while writings on social-relational models of disability acknowledge the disabling/enabling role of the social and material environment, *The Shape of Water* foregrounds how these two factors interact, thereby highlighting the role of everyday design(ers) in making environments more inclusive.

In this connection, the film’s narrative mode and content hold great promise to facilitate understanding of how different people and environments interrelate. The storyline and scenography can be understood as bringing Rorty’s and others’ ethics to life as a kind of ‘therapeutic philosophy’, a form of ‘low cunning’ more authentically tool-like and useful in its application to the design of inclusive environments than high-minded moralising or legislative measurements. Although derived from human consideration, designers too often experience these measurements as restrictive, compromising their creativity and discouraging imaginative design solutions. In contrast, through the
agency of magical realism, _The Shape of Water_ invites its audience to reimagine the world within an alternative context, and to explore the potential of accommodating a/symmetry creatively. Its central characters’ otherness is accommodated, on the one hand, by del Toro’s own imagination — the way he reconceptualises environmental regimes through the realistic depiction of dreams and imaginative scenography, including, for instance, the costume design of Amphibian Man and the gill slits on Elisa’s neck.

On the other hand, it is accommodated through the agency and creative power of thoughtful characters who perform day-to-day activities and fulfil social roles, whether by cleaning and maintenance or by creatively repurposing and adapting ordinary objects and environments. In the tradition of celebrated Latin American writers and filmmakers, such as Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, and Alfonso Arau, del Toro ‘commingles the magical and the real, the supernatural and the natural, which, in turn, illuminate aspects of the world that may have been previously hidden [...]. By fusing seemingly divergent or contradictory elements the narrative mode entices [...] to explore a third space, which is hybrid in nature because of “the purely natural way in which abnormal, experientially impossible (and empirically unverifiable) events take place”.’

What motivated us to analyse _The Shape of Water_ is the claim — advanced by pragmatist philosophers and psychologists alike — that engaging with fiction may help navigate the real world. Therefore we would be remiss not to offer — by way of epilogue, and however briefly — at least some indication of how the film’s invitation may relate to real-world professional and everyday design(ers).

The potential of creatively accommodating a/symmetry, for example, is already recognised by parents putting together a Halloween costume for their disabled child. Usually, other children do not know what to make of their child’s condition, yet turning a wheelchair into a magical chariot, _Thomas the Tank Engine_ or a _PAW Patrol_ fire truck makes them genuinely jealous: ‘This is epic. This is the costume I wish I was in.’ Expressions of hybridity — in effect, a ‘third space’ — can be found in a treehouse designed by a team at the University of Michigan’s Taubman College of Architecture.

Differences between children with limited mobility and other users are minimised through an array of body prosthetics, including harnesses, ropes, tracks, and race car seats: ‘Everyone entering the treehouse uses these prosthetics to be “launched” 22 feet into the air, leaving wheelchairs and other terrestrial implements behind.’ In another example, the Multisensory Museum at Van Abbe in Eindhoven (the Netherlands), an art exhibition space co-designed by architects and disabled people, minimises the differences between people in wheelchairs and other people. Its designers create a space that invites all visitors to experience the art from a seated position. The walls guide visitors towards seating alcoves positioned to orient museum visitors slightly towards one other, in a circle around the artwork that can be completed by visitors using a wheelchair.
imagining a more inclusive world: notes on difference, disability, and space in *the shape of water*

**Figure 04.** Craig VanLaanen, Treehouse and Woodland Retreat in Mayville, Michigan, 2004. Collage: Kristine Synnes.

**Figure 05.** Multisensory Museum at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2019. Photo: Peter Cox.
In future work, we hope to further explore how *The Shape of Water* invites us to reimagine a more commodiously inclusive world, particularly ways in which ‘ordinary’ environments contain the kernel of extraordinary experience, which can beneficially influence, even restructure, encounters between and among diverse bodies and the diverse worlds we design to accommodate our differences.

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Several design approaches — universal design, inclusive design, design for fall — aspire to take into account the largest range of users possible. Despite their differences, here we consider them interchangeably and refer to them as ‘inclusive design’, as this directly reflects their common ambition.


13 In this context, we prefer the specificity of ‘novel’, ‘screenplay’, and ‘film’ or ‘cinema’ to the more general but equally appropriate alternative ‘literature’, commonly used as a description of the total order of words surrounding a given subject, including scholarly and academic articles, essays, research papers, books, and other publications.


22 Clarkson and Coleman, ‘History of Inclusive Design in the UK’, 235.


Central to othering is an asymmetry of power relations: ‘only the dominant group is in a position to impose the value of its particularity (its identity) and to devalue the particularity of others (their otherness) while imposing discriminatory measures.’ Staszak, ‘Other/Otherness’, 44.


For a discussion of the theme of eggs and fertility in the film, see Wilde, Crawshaw, and Sheldon, ‘Talking About The Shape of Water’, 1529.


Fiction and fabulations are at the heart of the appearance-reality distinction, in Order of Water, p. 15.

In this manner, writers utilize metaphors, dreams and beliefs to transform Western discourse through its self-referentiality. Wilde, ‘Talking About The Shape of Water’, 48.

Film and novels have already been employed to explore how aging transforms the body’s relationship to quotidian space, or how poetic gastronomy and community transformation interrelate. See Daniel S. Friedman, ‘Place in Aging’, in University of Arkansas Community Design Center, Third Place Ecologies (Novado, CA: ORO Editions, 2017); Daniel S. Friedman, ‘Cuisine and the Compass of Ornament’, in Eating Architecture, ed. by Jamie Horwitz and Paulette Slingly (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2004), pp. 115–30; Tenna Doktor Olsen Tvedebrink, and others, ‘Talking About The Shape of Water’, 1529.

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