

# building material

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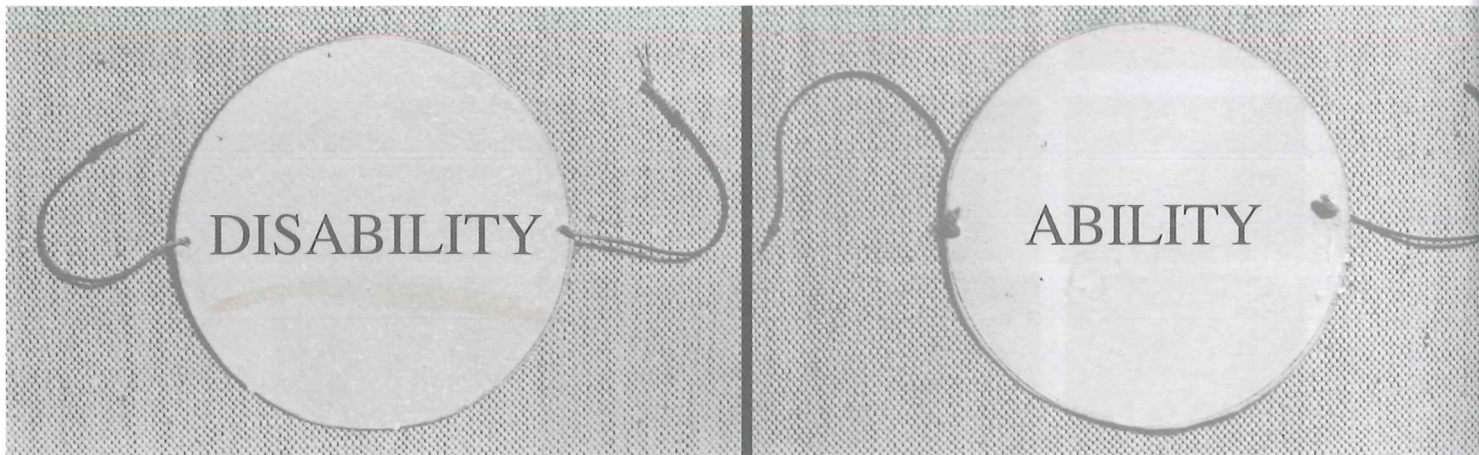
# disABILITY

JOHN ZISSOVICI

**Disability** is usually seen as the flip side, or more precisely, the down side of **ability**. Yet when this metaphor is taken literally, and a disk with those two words written on its opposite sides is made to spin, as in the early perceptual toys, based on the phenomenon of persistence of vision, that were the precursors of cinema, the two words merge into one, and **ability** appears as a densification, merely a possibility within **disability**. As the rotating disc undermines the spatial juxtaposition of the two terms, the oppositional relationship between them also disappears, along with the privileging of **ability** over disability. While the disc is in

motion, one occupies both conditions simultaneously, or exists in a suspended state, oscillating between ability and disability. All that is taken for granted is undone by motion.

As a theoretical model for visualizing new relationships between disability and ability, this little toy proposes a theory of perpetual movement between the two conditions. It has equally productive consequences for the language through which we discuss those terms. After all, it is just words spinning in space and time, and toys are meant to be played with.



In this project, architecture, combined with Braille, the text of those who cannot see, produces the same destabilizing effect on notions of ability/disability as the spinning disk. Reading itself is again spatialized, requiring the 'reader' to be mobile, and text is read as the limit of space.

Inscribed into the irregular widening of the hallway of an old renovated school building, the **L** (for language or lunch) shaped blue glow of eight 4-foot long fish tanks, is the singular organizational and identifying element (besides the excellent food) of the Café DeWitt. The frieze of glowing, colourful, 'Lite-Brite' Braille text, running just below the tanks, is the conceptual device linking the Café to the culture of reading of its neighbour, an antique bookshop, and to all the difficult and failed attempts at reading that the old school building must have witnessed. For a space with no windows, this assemblage provides a densely coded exteriority of underwater life.

**Braille**, a code comprised of a rectangular six-dot cell on its end, with up to 63 possible combinations, is the 'invisible' tactile text for those who cannot see. In book form it appears as a subtle surface articulation on the backside of paper perforated by a small punch. 'Lite-Brite', '[t]he original light-up picture maker', is a toy introduced by Hasbro in 1967 that practically every kid who grew up in America in the sixties is familiar with. As the ads proclaim, '[k]ids simply fit the pegs into the color-coded picture sheets and turn on the console to make the picture glow.' When these two modes of coded communication are conflated, both are partially disabled and a series of rich miss-readings occur.

While the Braille is in fact roughly at the height normally required for public spaces, both its exaggerated scale and three-dimensional articulation make it difficult to decipher. It is further obstructed by benches and tables, and should someone able to read Braille be led to it by a good Samaritan, the text's first line,

### **DON'T/TOUCH WHAT YOU ARE-AFTER IS NO LONGER THERE**

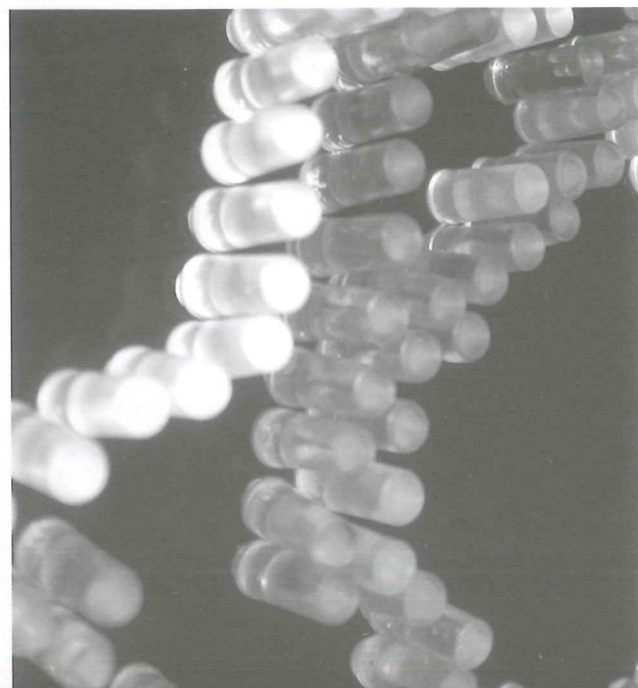
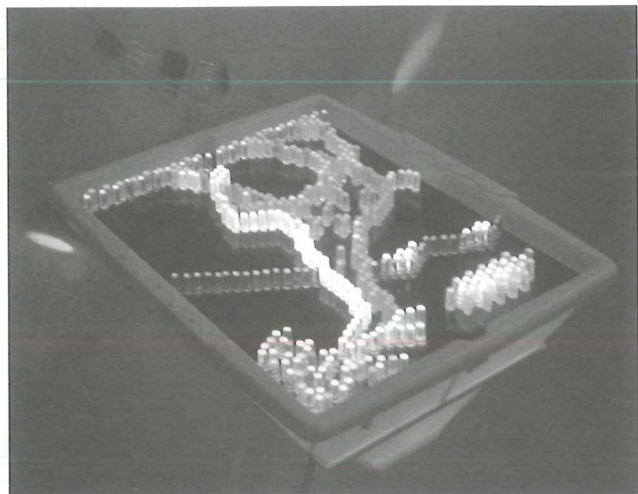
is not very encouraging. Clearly this text is not there to be 'read' by feel, though the 'Lite-Brite' pegs do beg to be touched. Nevertheless, those who persist will be rewarded by a tactile reading of the architectural insert, and of the fish world they cannot see through the directives cut up from William S. Burroughs' novels, inter cut with slices of Beaudelaire's poems, urging them to

### **SWALLOW UP THE DEAD LANGUAGES OF FISH AND ALL MUTE THINGS.**

For the vast majority of the Café's clientele, happy to just sit, eat and

### **DRINK UP THE ALERTNESS IN EYES GLINTING WITH SLOW FISH LUST**

of somebody else's lunch companion, the mysterious Braille text is likely to just frustrate their ability to read, and their expectations for 'Brite-Lite's' picture-making capabilities. The points of light transmitted by the little plastic 'Brite-Lite' pegs at first appear like remnants of a malfunctioning LED running text, which can no longer keep running to you. But the pattern



of the dots is clearly recognizable, the stillness permanent, and active participation is required to decipher this panoramic spectacle. Some have recorded the text and gone to on-line Braille sites for translations, while others have gone as far as inviting blind friends to lunch, with the hidden agenda of asking them to do the hard work.

The frieze of abstract text allows reading to be 'seen' as the spatial activity it had been until the advent of the book, and through its abstract properties, as an integral part of architecture. (Text, in/an architecture, has been generally rare since modern architecture used 'white-out' on decoration. Its occasional reappearance has further been discredited through association with failed regimes like Fascism and Post-Modernism.)

The bright strip of Braille dots, here used to transmit light, (the negative of the black spots created while recording the text through rubbings) is a concrete reminder of the allusive beauty of inaccessible languages and alphabets. The juxtaposition of the Braille text as subtitles to the silent, horizontal 'tableau vivant' of fish life, can only be reconciled by following the text's urging to

**COMMUNICATE IN THE  
SILENT MEDIUM OF  
TWISTING FISH  
SPASMS.**

**DREAM EXTASY-BLIND  
WORDS FALLING IN  
FISH COLORED  
FLASHES**

is the self-explanatory last segment of this text-line.

Café DeWitt renovation, Ithaca, New York

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