

What's wrong with Wonderland?

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After drinking from the little bottle in White Rabbit's house, Alice found herself growing uncomfortably big. © Fani Kostourou & Chrystala Psathiti

What's wrong with Wonderland?

Fani Kostourou and Chrystala Psathiti

For a space to become a place it needs love. We understand spaces as physical containers of everyday practices. When people fill and appropriate a space over time, they add an emotional value to it and turn it into a place. Loved and cherished spaces have a particular quality of resilience: they persist in time because they work well and suit the inhabitants, and they conquer time, so to speak, as long as they remain loved and relevant to human needs.

In this sense architecture is not about designing spaces that people need to adapt to, but about spaces that people can inhabit and adapt, independent of their body size and cultural practices. A space that considers standardised body measurements and behavioural taxonomies in its making as its main parameters, excludes those bodies that do not match to the homogenised average, from occupying and caring for it.

This is exactly what happened to Alice in Wonderland. The fantasy world depicted in this tale, defies all common sense and logic, and toys with our creative imagination. Alice is constantly trying to adapt to fit into the spatial conditions of Wonderland. By eating a particular cake or having a special drink, she grows smaller and larger several times to get through tiny doors and big houses. At first, she is curious and surprised in the face of the sudden changes her body goes through, but soon 'poor Alice' starts to feel anxious, frightened and unsure of herself. In the hallway she cries gallons of tears unable to reach the key fitting into the door that opens up to the loveliest garden. When she visits White Rabbit's home, she grows uncomfortably big resulting in her lying down on the floor, her head pressing to the ceiling, her elbow against the door, one foot up to the chimney, one arm curled around her head and the other one stuck out of the window!

No wonder, 'poor Alice' seems lost being in spaces that she constantly needs to adapt to. With a constant feeling of disorientation, she soon begins to miss her former home outside of Wonderland, because there her body never had to grow or shrink to adapt to the space around her. Whatever Alice had known about normal body sizes became redundant and obsolete in this other world, making her feel an 'abhuman'¹ subject, characterized by morphic variability.

Eventually, Lewis Carroll's story makes us wonder if there is such a thing as the 'right body size' that fits all spaces. As the architect and critical theorist Blanca Pujals² noted, there has been a conscious effort in history by scientists, sociologists, criminologists, statisticians and architects to come up with a normalized average body size that can inhabit the modern city in a perfect ergonomic way. If we want to learn from the story of 'poor Alice', we should start rethinking how human bodies can inhabit spaces in the non-Wonderland. As architects, we need to imagine spaces that people are able to transform to accommodate their needs, and fall in love with the spatial environment they spent time to create for themselves. Because if really anything was possible in Wonderland, Alice should have been able to make the doorway larger to access her beloved garden with the bright flowers and the cool fountains and have her adventure going on!

- 1 William Hope Hodgson, 'The Night Land', The Project Gutenberg EBook 2004 [original 1912]. www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0ahUKewiqxpvYpuTXAhWiHsAKHek4D-90QFggxMAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fflivros.universia.com.br%2Fdownload%2FThe-Night-Land-William-Hope-Hodgson.pdf&usg=AOvVaw2XeOLIP1rFaQ4q-3pdeUV. Retrieved: 28.11.2017.
- 2 Blanca Pujals, 'Bodily Cartographies: Pathologizing the body and the city', *The Funambulist*, Vol. 7 'Health Struggles', France 2016, pp. 22–27.



'Poor Alice' pressed against the ceiling seeking for her loveliest garden. © Fani Kostourou & Chrystala Psathiti



Alice falling into the pool of her own tears. © Fani Kostourou & Chrystala Psathiti