MAYOR OF LONDON

DESIGNING WITH

DISABLED EXPERIENCE

GOOD GROWTH BY DESIGN

DESIGNING A CITY

FOR ALL LONDONERS

‘The world we inhabit is abundant beyond our wildest imagination’

Paul Feyerabend (2001)

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DEPUTY MAYOR'S FOREWORD

London's diversity is one of its greatest strengths. However the voices and lived experiences of disabled people are often not reflected in the design and shaping of our built environment. 13.2 per cent of Londoners are disabled and while the built environment industry has made big strides in the design of our urban form to support how they live, play, work, and socialise in the city, there is more that is still to be done.

Many barriers exist for disabled people to thrive in our city, from a lack of appropriate housing typologies, inaccessible public spaces, to disabled people being underrepresented in the built environment industry, which embeds further economic, social, and environmental unfairness.

This report, part of a suite of Good Growth by Design guidance on inclusive design, speaks specifically about the importance of including the disabled experience in the design process and showcases best practice examples. It takes a purposefully wide definition of disability. This is needed to capture the breadth of experience of disability Londoners face. The report proposes

‘It is a call to action to all of us practitioners, professionals, and developers to design with the vast amount of disabled experience in our city.’

Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor

alternative ways of addressing accessibility, moving away from a tick-box exercise to a more creative approach for city makers. It offers tools to begin to question and change how our projects are imagined, set up, designed, used, and sustained.

This best practice guidance is a call to action for us as city makers, practitioners, and developers to better serve London’s disabled population by designing with the disabled experience in our minds. The changes advocated in the guidance are ambitious but necessary if we are to create better places and spaces that allow all Londoners to thrive and can create a better built environment for everyone, helping to build a fairer and more prosperous London for all.

Jules Pipe
Deputy Mayor

INTRODUCTION

Despite a great deal of societal and legal progress, navigating the world as a disabled, older, neuro-divergent, Blind, Deaf, and/or learning-disabled person is still laden with barriers, discriminatory attitudes, and an overall lack of care. Based on the 2021 census, 13.2 per cent of people in London are disabled (using the definition under the Equality Act 2010). This figure is likely to be even higher, given that not all people who experience disability or ableism class themselves as disabled – whether due to uncertainty around the term, fear of discrimination, or even internalised ableism.

In a world full of 'reasonable adjustments', disability is still seen as an undesirable state, with disabled people devalued as abnormal and treated as separate to the dominant able-bodied and neuro-typical people. The term 'reasonable' is entirely open to interpretation and is often governed by market-driven values. As a result, the exclusion of those who do not fit the 'normative template' is repeatedly justified through limiting processes such as financial viability or historical preservation. While society values productivity, economic growth, and profitability above all else, disabled

people will continue to be framed as burdensome, unproductive, and unprofitable.

This report is founded on a theoretical framework which depends on two key concepts: Disability Justice and the Affirmative Model of disability. This framework is the lens through which the report has been researched and written, and represents the foundational values upon which the recommendations are based. The Affirmative Model of disability does not see disability as a problem. It offers an approach that encourages presence, agency, and engagement. This way of seeing disability rejects 'tragic' or 'medicalised' perceptions by actively reinforcing a positive and valid identity for every individual – a commitment to disability pride. It also goes beyond a problem and solution approach, instead recognising disability, impairment, and difference as facets of human diversity to be valued.

Disability Justice considers disability in relation to other forms of oppression, for example the impact of racism, sexism, homophobia, and class and how these experiences might interact with ableism. It

takes notice of dominant power structures and the way these operate to value particular kinds of bodies and minds and not others. Disability justice must sit at the heart of design in order to move beyond traditionally accessible spaces and infrastructures towards an appreciation of justice and ethical practices as vital. Built environment practitioners must recognise the possibility that the buildings and spaces they create can contribute negatively to ableist ideas, and work actively against this in response.

Groups advocating and fighting for this in the UK include The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, who have been working to create new modes of practice with disabled practitioners for over a decade. More recently, groups such as Chris Laing's Deaf Architecture Front have been working across the industry to create more equitable practices and environments for deaf architects and students. This is still clearly an urgent matter when well-known projects such as Caruso St John's Peterloo Memorial in Manchester, Steven Holl's Hunters Point Library in New York, and Thomas Heatherwick's Vessel also in New York, have major access failures

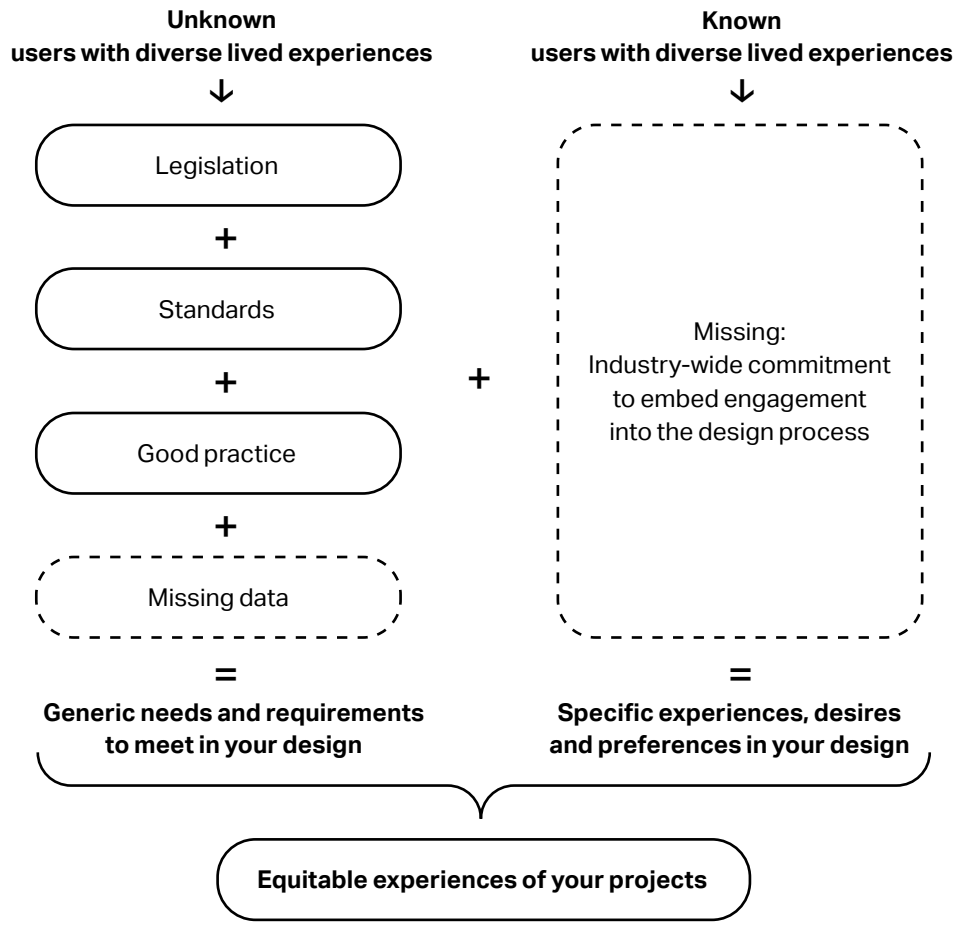
and are subject to campaigns for design changes and compensation.

The power of the disabled experience and its capacity to inform and drive meaningful change is undervalued across the built environment sector. In local authority planning departments there is a lack of knowledge and experience of disability in the design process. The 2022 Place Shaping Capacity Survey highlighted Inclusive Design capability as a key capacity need not being met and the least resourced discipline overall. This lack of both capacity and attention paid to designing and planning for disability is an issue that needs to be addressed.

A key problem caused in part by this lack of capacity and attention is that engagement with local people and groups – who can provide insight into the real, everyday experiences of people with diverse needs – often does not happen. Instead, there is an overreliance on regulations, standards, and guidance, which can focus on generic needs and requirements based on averages rather than specific desires and choices. If we want to design

for equitable experiences that go beyond what guidance could imagine, we must value the knowledge of known users. We do not currently have clear paths and processes in place to enable this.

AN INCLUSIVE DESIGN PROCESS



This report asks how the presence and agency of diverse disabled experiences within planning, design, and urban development can be reimagined with nuance, breadth, and care – not as passive receivers

of services but as creative agents with their own agency. What principles can set the basis for a re-newed approach to disability in the built environment and how can those principles enrich the planning and development of the built environment? In this report we develop answers to these questions by paying closer attention to how we regard disability. This includes reflecting on the language that informs our understanding, considering the shifting and blurring boundaries between disability and ageing, and taking an approach that incorporates the intersectionality which exists between disability and other under-considered narratives, such as gender, sexuality, and race. By exploring these different areas, we aim to devise a richer, more fulfilling approach to disability.

The report explores the presence, or lack thereof, of disabled people and their experiences within the planning and development of the built environment, focusing specifically on community engagement and its capacity to foster higher quality outcomes. Our research highlights how existing systems exclude or disincentivise disabled voices, often removing opportunities to create more equitable

spaces that have a lasting impact. Through a series of case studies, the report showcases best practice examples for the built environment sector. The report identifies successful processes and outcomes alongside a set of principles and prompts that move towards improved ways of thinking and forms of action. Overall, we challenge the ongoing reliance on basic and narrow forms of accessibility as benchmarks for successful design by introducing more experiential concepts such as ‘comfort’, ‘safety’ and ‘conviviality’ as spatial and ethical principles. These offer deeper considerations of the way disabled people could inhabit equitable space. In doing so, we aim to generate a deeper under-standing of the value of disabled people within the built environment sector.

Celebrating the specific desires of local people and groups in the design process can not only foster a rich, creative and collaborative approach but it can also also create a culture that extends beyond the early stages of the design process into the everyday life of a space, where individuals and communities feel agency and ownership as the ongoing stewards of a rich, creative environment.

ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report centres on London's need to design spaces for and with a wide spectrum of deaf, disabled, neurodivergent, and older people, who are often denied an equitable experience in the built environment.
The report presents:

1. a framework for thinking about and discussing the diversity and difference between individual users which moves away from generic and standardised approaches towards intersectional and specific needs and desires;
2. a glossary of keywords that moves beyond conventional compliance-based language towards a model that embraces nuance and feeling;
3. a set of principles that put forward renewed concepts for how disability is valued in the planning and design process, illustrated by examples of possible actions;
4. a series of questions for each stage in the design and delivery of places to prompt deeper reflection and a rethinking of participatory design methods.

In addition to the above, this report will support the forthcoming review of the London Plan, as well as any future development of planning guidance. As part of ongoing efforts to improve the implementation of inclusive design policy, the GLA/London Plan team recently engaged with stakeholders.

This engagement, conducted through a series of virtual and in-person events with targeted stakeholders, has provided valuable feedback. This feedback will not only inform the review of planning policy on inclusive design and accessible housing but has also provided a wealth of insights and recommendations, for conducting accessible and inclusive consultation, and ideas for systemic change.

Research Methods

The evidence presented in this report was gathered using a variety of people-centred research methods to ensure disabled practitioners and the disabled community more broadly are involved, heard, and given agency. Three workshops were held on the themes of language, design development, and co-design. Participants included those with lived experience of disability, as well as built environment practitioners with relevant expertise. Alongside these workshops, desktop research was used to explore examples of good practice and a literature review. To support and guide the work two panels were established and met regularly to review the research: an internal GLA Steering Group and a Sounding Board including Mayor's Design Advocates and external practitioners with expertise in disability and spatial justice[1].

**'All bodies are unique and essential.
All bodies are whole.
All bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them.
We move together, with no body left behind.
This is disability justice.'**

Aurora Levins Morales and Patty Berne (2015)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

This glossary is intended to expand an understanding of what is meant by disability within the context of spatial justice, whilst highlighting the diversity, flexibility, and speciality of language that can be used. The terms presented offer definitions which are open to continuous development and revision, recognising that not all disabled people are the same, and that understandings will vary.

Considering the choice of words and their implications not only enables more people to feel included in conversation but expands the idea of what disability is and how equitable experiences can be more specifically defined. When considering access, design teams have the opportunity to expand their vocabulary to include more nuanced terms, such as 'presence' or 'comfort' or 'safety'. The use of these terms deepens access and introduces tangible considerations that inform experiences within the built environment. Discussing and agreeing on more specific characteristics can guide aims, clarify the brief, and inform design outcomes that are centred around a deeper quality of access and experience, which in turn will lead to a greater sense of agency for disabled people and enrich the built environment.
Terms can be both positively and negatively perceived, due to their use, context, history, politicisation, who they are directed towards, and who is speaking. For example, 'Crip', a term that has recently been reclaimed by many disabled people as a point of pride and ownership over their disability. The term is used in many ways: some use it as a verb to alter something (e.g. to 'crip' a tool, or to adapt it for disabled usage), whereas others use it to point towards a wider community of voices that challenge ideas of what is normal. Similarly to the way 'queer' was first reclaimed by LGBTQIA+ activists, it is important to note that the term's usage is rooted in disabled communities. It must be used and driven by disabled people. Within this glossary, terms such as this are signposted with 'community language.'

For the purposes of this report, the terms 'disabled' and 'disability' are used to refer to the community of people whose sensory, physical, cognitive, psychological, and neurological experiences are often ignored or overlooked within the planning and design of the built environment. Although we acknowledge the limits of these terms, we use them to describe a community of people for whom barriers as well as ableism and its associated effects are an ongoing problem. We fully recognise there is no universal disabled person, and language cannot always adequately describe or discern the variety of experiences. Conventional language around access and disability groups people and characteristics together, and while it is convenient to do so, this reduces and generalises differences between people.

ACRONYMS BREAKDOWN

BEAP Built Environment Access Panel
CRP Community Review Panel
DAF Deaf Architecture Front
DRP Design Review Panel
DDA Disability Discrimination Act 1995
EDI Equality, Diversity, Inclusion
GLA Greater London Authority
IDO Inclusive Design Overlay
IDAG Independent Disability Advisory Group
MDA Mayor's Design Advocates
QRP Quality Review Panel
SAP Strategic Access Panel

Abundance
A sense of plentiful resources to go around, or, recognising variety in experience, e.g. creating places where everyone can thrive, instead of simply providing minimum standards of access; the opposite of scarcity.

Ableism
'Ableism is discrimination and social prejudice against people with physical or mental disabilities. Ableism characterises people as they are defined by their disabilities and it also classifies disabled people as people who are inferior to non-disabled people. On this basis, people are assigned or denied certain perceived abilities, skills, or character orientations.' – Simi Linton and Michael Bérubé (1998)

Able-bodied
Positions disability in relation to 'ability' in an ideology that assumes it is preferable to be 'able-bodied', resulting in the exclusion of disabled people.

Accessibility
The extent to which disabled people have the agency to define the terms of their own care, safety, and needs and to easily use, enter, and reach spaces, products, devices, services and curricula.

Access intimacy
The closeness of knowing that your needs are being understood by someone without needing to vocalise them.

Access ecology
'A term that brings forward the relational and situational dynamics of accessibility. Whereas "accessibility" is often treated as something specific to be retrofitted on at the end of a design process, "access ecology" insists that there's nothing outside of accessibility. And there is never no ecology.' – Kevin Gotkin (2023)

Access panels
Groups of people who are regularly and meaningfully involved in the design process of built environment projects. Access panellists may be appointed for their lived experience of disability and/or knowledge of lived experience of one or more protected characteristics.

Access strategy
Sets out the rationale for how the design and management of a building meets accessibility requirements of the likely end-users, demonstrating compliance with M1–M4 of Part M of the Building Regulations.

Affirmative model of disability
'The Affirmative Model of disability directly challenges the tragedy narrative of disability. It regards disability not as a problem or as something to be cured, removed or minimised, but as a way of living in the world and experiencing life.' – Poppy Levison (2023)

Ageing
The process of growing older.

Ageism
'Stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how we act) towards others or oneself based on age.' – World Health Organization

Ask culture
A behavioural norm in which people ask others what they desire, encouraging wants and needs to be openly requested, regardless of how reasonable they may seem. In contrast with 'guess culture', which relies on indirect cues and can result in discomfort in asking for something when not certain of a positive response.

Assistive devices
Technology used by disabled people, often created by non-disabled people. Engineered but not necessarily designed, assistive devices tend to fall in line with an overtly medicalised conception of disability. This approach, apart from ignoring the experiences and agency of disabled people, makes the technology appear awkward and largely irrelevant to a non-disabled society. 'The design aspiration should be about giving people something they want to use rather than have to use.' – David Constantine (2016)

Beauty
A divisive and largely socially constructed term alluding to aesthetic value, co-opted by a society to promote various standards and/or undermine others. In this way, beauty tends towards a singular, narrow definition influenced by colonialisms, encompassing a moral judgement of good/bad. In a society that values 'able-bodiedness' and sees it as good, disability is regarded as a transgression – something ugly and bad.

Beauty is mouldable and can be taken up by disabled people as a means of exploration. Beauty can promote other standards, such as intimacy, pleasure, and care, and offer a deeper, more profound understanding of the lives of disabled people.

Bodyminds
A term used in disability studies to describe the complex and inseparable relationship between the body and mind, and how the two act as one.

Co-design
'A design methodology that uses creative and participatory approaches with the aim of sharing knowledge and power in the design process.' – Beyond Sticky Notes (2022)

Comfort
The quality of finding a personal sense of physical and mental rest.

Conviviality
The quality of space which provides care, enjoyment, social connection, and welcome.

Crip (community language)
'disabilities and illnesses not yet marked as such; for traumas, health histories, and other "unwellness" that rarely register as "disability"; for non normative ways of being that have historical and contemporary resonances with "disability"; and for political orientations affiliations, and solidarities still emerging' – Mel Y. Chen, Alison Kafer, Eunjung Kim and Julie Avril Minich (2023)

Crip time (community language)
An approach to time that respects the needs and desires of our bodies and minds. Disability scholars describe crip time in multiple ways: Margaret Price describes it as living our lives with a 'flexible approach to normative time frames' and Alison Kafer says that 'rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds'. – Margaret Price (2011) and Alison Kafer (2013)

Crip killjoy (community language)
Inspired by Sara Ahmed's framing of the Feminist Killjoy, Corinne Lajoie describes this as '... how the bodyminds, sensations, affects, and needs of disabled people put them at odds – at times willingly and at other times, unwillingly – with cultural demands for happiness'.
– Corinne Lajoie (2023)

Deaf gain
A concept and framework that challenges the social and medical perception of deafness as a loss, viewing it rather as a form of cognitive and sensory diversity and or linguistic minority – in contrast to 'hearing loss'.

‘Not only does the notion of time have many experiences and meanings to diverse disabled people, but ableist society believes that time is neutral – and puts pressure on us all to feel guilt if we are not endlessly productive.’

The DisOrdinary Architecture Project (2024)

DeafSpace
An approach to the design of space by and for deaf people which embodies not only cultural traditions of deaf communities but is centred around 5 design principles: sensory reach, space and proximity, mobility and proximity, light and colour, and acoustics. It challenges environments created by hearing people by altering space to fit and work for deaf movement and communication. ‘It’s a creative, cultural, experimental way of being in the world that has many benefits that we are just now starting to uncover, certainly in the world of architecture.’ – Hansel Bauman (2018)

Disability
Disability represents everyone who considers themselves to be disabled, regardless of whether the label is legally recognised or not. Disability can ‘include people with physical impairments, people who belong to a sensory minority, people with emotional disabilities, people with cognitive challenges, and those with chronic/severe illness’.
– Sins Invalid (2020)

Disability justice
A movement that was founded and has its roots in brown, Black and queer-bodied disabled communities: ‘Disability justice is a social justice movement which focuses on examining disability and ableism as they relate to other forms of oppression and identity such as race, class and gender’. – Lakshmi Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018)

Disability-led
Historically, disabled people have often been represented by others – by medical and other experts, or well-meaning philanthropists and volunteers, particularly through a charitable model that does things ‘for’ disabled people, rather than with them, or indeed led by disabled people. Increasingly diverse disabled people have been advocating for themselves instead and many charities have moved on from more paternalistic versions. It remains important – before choosing collaborators – to pay attention to what a disability organisation stands for, how it is run, and to take into account any positive or negative reports from disability activists.

Disability rhetoric
First coined by Jay Dolmage, disability rhetoric describes how power is validated through means of communication, for example a conversation between a clinical ‘professional’ and a patient. While it often highlights the ways in which power can be exploitative, disability rhetoric can be taken up disabled people to assert their own experiences and claim a greater sense of agency.

Equity
‘The situation in which everyone is treated fairly according to their needs.’ – Cambridge Dictionary (2024)

Equality
'The right of different groups of people to have a similar social position and receive the same treatment.' – Cambridge Dictionary (2024)

Inclusive design
'Inclusive design is a design process in which a product, service, or environment is designed to be usable for as many people as possible, particularly groups who are traditionally excluded from being able to use an interface or navigate an environment. Its focus is on fulfilling as many user needs as possible, not just as many users as possible.'
– Joyce Alita (2022)

Intersectionality
'A concept that describes how systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination 'intersect' to create unique dynamics and effects.' – Center for Intersectional Justice (2022) and Crenshaw (1989)

Lived experience
'The first-hand involvement or direct experiences and choices of a given person, and the knowledge that they gain from it, as opposed to the knowledge a given person gains from second-hand or mediated source.' – Robin M. Boylorn (2008)

Mad (community language)
'A term historically used to oppress people who experience emotional distress and non-normative or non-conventional states of being. Mad has been reclaimed as a socio-political identity for people who experience emotional distress and/or who have been labelled as "mentally ill" or as having "mental health issues". A mad individual is a person whose identity and selfhood are contrary to convention, subverting, defying, disrupting, and liberating oneself from what is considered "sane". To be mad is to take pride in the mental states that have been deemed criminal and deficit.' – Madness Network News

Marginalisation
The act of treating a group as unimportant, insignificant, or peripheral.

Medical model of disability
The medical model of disability assumes people are disabled by their individual impairments or differences. Disability becomes a personal problem, viewed as a tragedy but not a societal problem, where disabled people are expected to strive to overcome their impairments. The emphasis is on cure and being fixed, making disabled people 'fit' better with the normative world, rather than the world adapting creatively to them. Often used by disabled people as a counterpoint to more positive versions such as social, affirmative, and relational models.

Neurodivergence
Kassiane Asasumasu defines neurodivergence as people 'whose neurocognitive functioning diverges from dominant societal norms in multiple ways'. She intended for these terms to apply to a broad variety of people, not just people with neurodevelopmental disorders, such as autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and dyslexia. She further emphasised that it should not be used to exclude people but rather to include them.

Neurodiversity
Whilst neurodivergence is specifically used to describe those with neurological patterns outside the norm, neurodiversity refers to the wide variety across all our mental states. The neurodiversity movement is led by activists who are against medical interventions as a way to 'cure' or 'fix' individuals, instead promoting support systems such as inclusion-focused services, accommodations, communication and assistive technologies, occupational training, and independent living support. They argue for honouring the rich diversity of our human brains, rather than forcing people to perform within normative society.

Neurotypical (community use)
A term used by neurodivergent activists as a label for anyone who has a typical neurotype and fits into the norm of thinking patterns; that is, has over-developed and irrational social concerns and a lack of clarity in thinking.

neuroqueer (community language)
There are multiple definitions of neuroqueer. One is 'being both neurodivergent and queer, with some degree of conscious awareness and/or active exploration around how these two aspects of one's being entwine and interact (or are, perhaps, mutually constitutive and inseparable).' Neuroqueer can also include 'Engaging in practices intended to undo and subvert one's own cultural conditioning and one's ingrained habits of neuronormative and heteronormative performance, with the aim of reclaiming one's capacity to give more full expression to one's uniquely weird potentials and inclinations'. – Nick Walker (2021)

Normate
A concept developed by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson to describe people who can take positions of authority primarily due to having perceived 'normal' bodyminds and cultural capital.

Normative
An established standard or norm that defines socially accepted behaviour or bodies.

Perseveration
'Actions disabled people engage in to maintain relations within, toward, around, or in defiance of a given space. These actions might be considered pleasurable, painful, embarrassing, entertaining, transgressive, involuntary, purposeful or any other number of affective modes.' – M. Remi Yergeau (2023)

Queer-bodied
Queer-bodied is a relational set of ideas and concepts around how queer people inhabit bodies in certain ways, as opposed to non-queer bodies. Much like experiences of crip/disability, these alternative forms of embodiment, whilst often rich, varied and joyful, are often subjected to forms of prejudice and discrimination by dominant value systems, leading to the development of diverse social and physical spaces.

radical compassion
'radical compassion (intended lower case) is a will to care for, a commitment to feel with, a striving to learn from, a readiness to work alongside, and an openness to be vulnerable before a precarious other, though they may be drastically dissimilar to yourself.'
– La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2023)

Reasonable adjustments/accommodations
The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on organisations to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that disabled people have equal access to education, employment, housing, goods, and services including shops, banks, cinemas, hospitals, council offices, leisure centres, as well as private functions. The intention is to ensure that disabled people are not put at a disadvantage. Adjustments can include making physical changes to the environment or providing assistance. However, adjustments only have to be made if it is 'reasonable' to do so. This may be defined by cost, practicability, and the size of the organisation. What is considered reasonable often fails to meet the day to day needs of disabled individuals with the kind of nuance that is required.

Relational model of disability
The relational model (or political/relational or social/relational) of disability is a hybrid conceptual framework bridging social and medical models, suggested by disability theorist Alison Kafer. In this model she proposes that 'the problem of disability is located in inaccessible buildings, discriminatory attitudes, and ideological systems that

attribute normalcy and deviance to particular minds and bodies. The problem of disability is solved not through medical intervention or surgical normalization but through social change and political transformation.' – Alison Kafer (2013)

Social model of disability
The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised. It looks at ways of removing attitudinal and physical barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be more independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives.

Spatial justice
'The conceptualisation of a framework that addresses how intersecting issues of justice – climate, health, inclusivity etc. – manifest in space, be it in commissioning and planning processes, urban and building design, and the claim to and use of space.' – DSDHA (2023)

Spontaneity
One of the outcomes of access being met – the capacity to engage in life freely, without restrictions of time or space.

Spoon Theory
A popular metaphor developed by Christine Miserandino to refer to units of energy (spoons) that chronically ill/disabled people have a limited supply of each day. The theory is closely tied to crip time and leads to a deeper understanding of personal capacities and how disabled people have to organise their time in a way that non-disabled people do not.

Technoableism
The belief, often encouraged by those who are non-disabled, that the lives of disabled people are lacking because of their disability and could be improved by eliminating disability through the use of technology.

Universal design
Universal design, first promoted by Ronald Mace established principles against which access and usability could be defined and measured to ensure that the environment can be understood and used by all people regardless of age, size, age or disability.

'When we fit harmoniously and properly into the world, we forget the truth of contingency because the world sustains us.'

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2011)

WHY DESIGNING WITH DISABILITY MATTERS

MOVING BEYOND ACCESS

It is often assumed that thinking about and designing with disability demands a standardised approach to access challenges. This perspective reduces designing for and with disability to a simple question of whether basic (often called functional) access needs are being met. Practices such as inclusive design have made progress in developing methodologies and improving standards, but many design approaches fixate on outdated beliefs about disabled people and their communities. The individual – their meaningful experience, their capacity to know themselves and others, their affinities, and their moments of collective feeling – is rarely brought into the conversation. Similarly, conventional definitions of disability as a limitation do not capture, reflect, or act as an identity for many people. Deaf communities, for example, are both a rich culture and a linguistic minority. Some neurodivergent people have argued that have their neurological makeup is a positive way of being in the world. Disability, defined as a protected characteristic, also exists alongside people with conditions that are not labelled as such – for example, ageing and illness. All these communities, and many more, stand in solidarity with one another, fighting for acknowledgement of the value and richness of our diverse humanity and the need for the built environment to better match that variety.

There are many examples of disabled people devising methods and approaches to reach out and care for one another. In 1977 disabled activists occupied a San Francisco federal building, with the help of the Black Panthers. It was widely documented not only for its unprecedented longevity – they occupied the building for 25 days – but also for the DIY interventions devised to support one another's access needs, including building makeshift beds, providing care and food, and communicating with the outside world through windows using sign language. These kinds of hacks and retrofits were designed by disabled people for others with often diverse and seemingly opposed needs, demonstrating the way disabled people can have a deeper, more sensitive approach to

one another. Often, the solutions a disabled person develops are more useful than those designed by non-disabled people.

This type of care falls in line with what radical mad Black scholar La Marr Jurelle Bruce terms 'radical compassion'. radical compassion (author lower case) describes the desire to find a mode of unity through difference. It is: 'a striving to learn from, a readiness to work alongside, and an openness to be vulnerable before [someone who] may be drastically dissimilar to yourself.' radical compassion sets itself apart from conventional forms of disability engagement in the way that it asks us to care across difference.

Non-disabled designers often undervalue the extent to which disabled people self-advocate and generate their own tools and approaches to navigating inaccessible spaces. Scholar M. Remi Yergeau has explored how neurodivergent people create access through inaccessible space, which they describe as acts of perseveration:

> 'actions disabled people engage in to maintain relations within, toward, around, or in defiance of a given space. These actions might be considered pleasurable, painful, embarrassing, entertaining, transgressive, involuntary, purposeful or any other number of affective modes.' – M. Remi Yergeau (2023)

Perseveration highlights that disabled people often already engage with space in a variety of subtle and explicit ways, and so any approaches to access must prioritise the knowledge and expertise that disabled people have generated.

While there are examples of spaces and practices (some of which are included in this report) that are beginning to take seriously the presence of disabled people, disability is still viewed first and foremost as a problem to tackle – whether financial, political, or spatial. This is in part due to how the Social Model of Disability – which describes disability as socially constructed through physical and attitudinal

'Disability signifies a way of life always ready to touch us, not as the warning of a misfortune or the search for inclusive empathy, but as an experience that [...] would be caressing, connecting, reaching out and embracing us through the relational and interdependent nature of our vulnerability'

Maldondo Ramirez (2020)

barriers that can be removed – has been implemented through legislation in ways that focus on defining disability categories one-dimensionally, and then creating readymade design 'solutions'.[2] Although this approach to disability has led to more attention being paid to the barriers faced by disabled people in the built environment by planners, developers, and architects, it still frames disability as a problem and doesn't take into account the potential value of disability or the range of ways diverse disabled and other marginalised people experience the world. When access and inclusion remains an 'add-on', it is something that can be argued away in terms of expense or scarce resources, or framed only as a case by case 'reasonable adjustment' or 'accommodation'. As Tanya Titchkosky's describes:

> 'Unless the relation between environment and its participants is theorised and thereby disturbed, disability will continue to be

included as an excludable type even as the physical environment changes. The discursive act of making something 'justifiably absent' ultimately has much to do with how we delimit the shape of possible worlds.' – Tanya Titchkosky (2011)

The way in which urban environments are planned, designed, and built adheres to a formula built around rigid bureaucracies, important but outdated codes of practice, and design and implementation hierarchies that leave out (or don't consider) the many ways disabled people interact with space. Although some standards and guidance documents do provide more considered ideas of inclusion, they are often either unaffordable (like BS 8300: The Standard for Design of an accessible and inclusive built environment), or underutilised because they are not yet mandatory (like PAS 6463: Design for the Mind). Design teams should commit time and effort to creatively engage with people who have different lived experiences in order to provoke ideas for equitable experiences.

One form of engagement with disabled and other under-represented groups is the Access Panel. The Built Environment Access Panel case study described in this report shows how important a cohesive system or review is for ensuring designers and developers meet and go beyond minimum standard. But it also shows how important future access panels could be in sharing knowledge and lessons learned. Access panels benefit from both lived experience and industry experience – they can talk to developers, design teams, operators and users, to learn from them and each other. Panels don't just talk about disability, they can discuss related areas like affordable housing, transport and culture, and a committed, trained, and properly compensated access panel can generate a sense of shared accountability across social justice issues. A future form of knowledge sharing to create social citizenship could take a more community centred approach, where everyday citizens, those local and non-local, can shape spaces through their own experiences and knowledge of them.

The design of Access Panels and community engagement activities more broadly is critical to ensuring there are no financial, social, or spatial barriers for involving disabled communities. Common barriers include not being able to attend in person, to a lack of BSL interpretation, to labour intensive site walks, and even design exercises or conversations that do not enable and support neurodivergent people. Urban rooms are an example of a community development tool which can be rooted in flexible and hybrid engagement through on site spaces for discussion and digital platforms. This hybridity is essential for enabling disabled people who cannot leave the home, travel easily, are vulnerable to covid or have social anxieties to still participate.

Another way that designers have attempted to get around the compliance and checklist approach to access is by advocating for the principle of universal design (UD), a concept that reduces all users to a single and universal set of needs requiring equal prioritisation. Like the Social Model, UD has been criticised by disabled activists for its 'decentering of disability, denying its values and insights, and its collectivisation alongside other characteristics 'universal design' (in theory) eradicates disability by eradicating inaccess'[3]. The consequence is that disability becomes less directly considered.

In contrast to this decentering of disability, this report calls to recentre the disabled experience. The slogan 'Nothing about us without us' had been used across many international groups since the 1930s, and was brought to the UK by disabled South African activist Vic Finkelstein who was a founder member of the Union for the Physically Impaired Against Segregation – a key part of the developing disability rights movement in this country (UPIAS 1976). It represents the idea that no policy decision, action – or in the case of this report, shift in thinking – should be decided or carried out without participation by those affected by the changes. We now have the opportunity to deeply consider what engaging with disability could mean for the built environment, and how we can go beyond questions of access in our consideration of disabled people.

As such, this essay puts forward the case for the 'disability critique'. This is a way of thinking about disability not only as a means of improving experiences and realities of space for disabled people, but rather as a lens to think about who buildings are for and how we experience them. Architectural researcher and educator David Gissen argues that 'a critical understanding of disability imagines the contributions impairment brings to an understanding of being human – something that might be unleashed, gained, and even preserved within society'[4]. It is through this affirmative, social-value driven approach to disability, that the design and development of space can be just.

'We are all interdependent. Being dependent is not something bad – society is based on interdependence, and it's time we suggest an interdependent design that can show the beauty and power of dependency as a societal construct.'

Nic Palmarini (2023)

THE BLURRED BOUNDARIES OF DISABILITY

Many of us will personally experience disability in our lifetime but may know it by another name: broken limbs, illness, menstrual symptoms, and perhaps most commonly, conditions of older age, such as hearing loss, sight loss, muscle loss, or dementia. We may experience changes slowly over time as we age, or we may experience a sudden lifestyle change due to a fall or other event. As already mentioned, we need to broaden our understanding of human variety beyond disability categories alone, including illnesses such as depression, cancer and environmental sensitivities as well as work and societal-related conditions such as trauma. Disability ebbs and flows. It is a process of being and not a category. Rather than regarding it as a static experience, it is more helpful to regard disability as a varied and dynamic way of being, one that can become more or less pronounced within environments and contexts that cater towards it or present barriers. This idea offers a more useful and impactful way of formulating the role of access, defining it as a dynamic set of procedures (that might shift and change) rather than simply something that has to be complied with.

The World Health Organisation states that there are 1.3 billion disabled people in the world, but more than 2.5 billion people with accessibility needs. The boundaries of disability are indeed blurred, making space for: 'disabilities and illnesses not yet marked as such; for traumas, health histories, and other "unwellness" that rarely register as "disability"; for non-normative ways of being that have historical and contemporary resonances with "disability"[5]' (Chen et al, 2023).

In addition many emerging advocacy groups amongst voices that have not previously been heard. This includes a decentering physical mobility as the primary form of advocacy to include other groups such as learning disabled, deaf or neurodivergent communities towards groups with environmental sensitivities, Mad campaigns and those harmed by poverty, war and trauma.

One of the ways we can look at these blurred boundaries is through the concept of ageing. Even though we all age differently depending on circumstances, genetics, exposures, and choices, ageing is a universal experience we all share. Too many older people are isolated and underserved by inaccessible design and exclusive design processes. This leads to older people not having choices to meaningfully participate in society, which proliferates negative ageist stereotypes about older people and in turn furthers generational divides.

More broadly, there is a misconception that older communities have little agency and control over the design of their built environment. However, there are many examples which shows this is not the case – one of which, New Ground Co-housing, is included in this report. While a highly successful model of interdependent co-housing, many barriers were put in place by local planners, policymakers, and housing developers which delayed and frustrated the realisation of this project. Driven entirely by its residents, it demonstrates the power that these communities have to create spaces that work for them so they can focus on what they want to do, not whether they're able to do it.

It is vital that we create better choices for how we engage with the built environment in older age. Designing with disabled experiences can help achieve this. Ageism is often confused with ableism or influenced by ableist attitudes, where people make unproductive assumptions about what someone is 'able' to do. If we don't learn from and listen to older people in the design process, we are more at risk of letting ageist and ableist assumptions influence design decisions. Although ageism can share similarities with ableism, the two are distinct in their preconceptions. These preconceptions can actively isolate one group from the other, negating the solidarity needed to create more cohesive communities. By designing with disability in such a way that values the voices and intersectional experiences of older people of different races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations, we can design towards an intergenerational society where interdependence and positive social exchange between generations benefits society.

THE FUTURE OF DESIGNING WITH DISABILITY

The reliability of 'accessible' space is delicate and tenuous. The design of urban mobility, the way we move across the city and its connections, is fractured and under-resourced. Housing is disparate, inadequate, or unaffordable. Access to night-time culture and its infrastructures are practically non-existent for disabled people. Varied and accessible forms of play are missing or undervalued. Each of these factors, and many more, prevent disabled people and communities from experiencing space in spontaneous, comfortable, and abundant ways.

Architecture would not exist if it was just a question of 'gaining entry.' The role of architecture goes deeper than that. Architects believe in questions of meaningful experience, around the quality of how buildings are experienced – but experienced by whom? Disabled voices are too often excluded. Architects and developers might work with an access consultant, but not take seriously the contributions of a disabled user. The reason for much of this is that for too long, the voices of disabled people have been left out of the picture.

Going further than advocacy, this essay highlights the importance of meaningful inclusion, not through mere representation or presence but by the equity to engage – 'inclusion is not about bringing people into what already exists; it is about creating a new space, a better space for everyone'[6]. By bringing together disabled voices, practitioners, and thinkers, with projects, organisations, and systems, we can reimagine the possibilities enabled when disability is placed at the centre, and not the periphery, of design and planning. Centring disability in design not only ensures the disabled perspective is heard, but it also provides opportunities for disabled communities to meet, form, and create mutual understandings of their varied desires: 'Mutual aid is a central tenet of the disability justice movement, led by disabled people of colour and queer disabled people, and enabled through principles of collective access'[7].

Approaches to access, like other aspects of design, are founded on certain values and beliefs – access does not simply come into being. The way we consider access is intrinsically tied to questions of disability: around what we view disability as and how we see disabled people. For progress to be made around access, the question of disability and how we view it must shift. We must begin to see disability as more multi-faceted, as a place of critique and engagement, where potential barriers to the use and enjoyment of places and spaces are anticipated and addressed. Moving beyond access means considering the value that disability and the experiences of disabled people might bring to the built environment. It means thinking about disability in relation to other spatial justice movements and how they relate to one another; ultimately, moving beyond access means moving away from disability as a problem.

> 'The way we imagine discrimination or disempowerment often is more complicated for people who are subjected to multiple forms of exclusion. The good news is that intersectionality provides us a way to see it.' – Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw (2017)

Inclusion should consider diversity in its broadest sense. Humans typically do not occupy a single identity but rather multiple complex intersecting characteristics that need to be considered together. Design that simplifies and isolates the complexity of people's identities will not be able to serve them in a meaningful way. One of the primary challenges of inclusive design, particularly in respect to disability, is how different needs and desires which may contradict each other, are met and work together. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw argues that 'if you don't have a lens that's been trained to look at how various forms of discrimination come together, you're unlikely to develop a set of policies that will be as inclusive as they need to be'[8].

Towards new ways of living

'We need a new spatial contract. In the context of widening political divides and growing economic inequalities, we call on architects to imagine spaces in which we can generously live together:

- together as human beings who, despite increasing individuality, yearn to connect with one another and with other species across digital and real space;
- together as new households looking for more diverse and dignified spaces for inhabitation;
- together as emerging communities that demand equity, inclusion, and spatial identity;
- together across political borders to imagine new geographies of association;
- together as a planet facing crises that require global action for all of us to continue living at all.'[9]

Hashim Sarkis' call for a new spatial contact, to reimagine new ways of living together, speaks directly to the need for new spatial, social, and economic models of space. For disabled people and communities who are often 'provided' access to existing, insufficient or outdated models of space, like housing for example, new models present an opportunity to restructure. Living alone in a block of flats, without connection to neighbours, no community areas, no sense of literal or financial security is not conducive to a more holistic, reimagined idea of accessibility. Current practices merely give us access to existing models which fail to support in the long term. From co-housing, community land trusts, and intergenerational neighbourhoods there are many existing – as well as not yet imagined – typologies of living together that places the new values outlined in this essay at the forefront.

'Disability offers a new horizon for architecture. Moreover, it illuminates new forms of practice necessary to achieve it.'

Ignacio Galan (2022)

PRINCIPLES

INTRODUCTION

The following set of principles and examples provide not only guidance for design thinking, but provocations based on centring disability and difference. These principles draw from a rich and varied history of disability studies scholarship, activism, and design, as well as the work of contemporary researchers, inclusive designers, and practitioners. Alongside each principle is an example of good practice or innovation, selected because they provide new ways of approaching design, ways of living, forms of engagement, organisational structures, and curation across multiple scales.

These principles not only introduce existing disability-centred concepts but relate them to spatial and design challenges that must be tackled together. These principles are not intended as an 'answer' but as a starting point for further dialogue.

Getting the basics right

The Building Regulations cover access to and use of buildings in dwellings and buildings other than dwellings. Guidance on inclusive design standards can be found in the British Standard documents listed below. The London Plan, the spatial development strategy for London, includes a planning objective to build inclusive communities and planning policy requirements for inclusive design, accessible housing and good design. These include that:

- those involved in planning and development must encourage early and inclusive engagement with stakeholders in the development of proposals, policies and strategies;
- development must meet the highest standards of accessibility and inclusion;
- 10 per cent of new dwellings must meet Building Regulation requirement M4(3) 'wheelchair user dwellings' and all other dwellings must meet Building Regulation requirement M4(2) 'accessible and adaptable dwellings'

(which includes step-free access to a building);
- boroughs and applicants should make use of design r

Statutory Building Regulations:
- The Building Regulations 2010, Approved Document M (Access to and use of buildings) Volume 1: Dwellings, Volume 2: Buildings other than dwellings, HM Government, 2015 edition

London Plan 2021:
- Good Growth Objective 1: Building strong and inclusive communities
- Policy D5 Inclusive Design
- Policy D7 Accessible Housing
- Policy D Delivering Good Design

‘Disabled people are not trying to be like everyone else, and in fact, they are changing the world by making things that refuse assimilation and conformity.’

Aimi Hamraie (2023)

1 THINK BEYOND ACCESS

When built environment sector professionals and educators talk about access, they most often mean designing functional access for disabled people, that is, making it possible for disabled people to get in the door and navigate their way safely around a space. While for many years disabled people have been arguing for even this most basic form of access, they are also increasingly going beyond such simplistic understandings. Rather than ‘adding’ access at the end of the design process, disabled people are demanding that the built environment provides appropriate, supportive and meaningful experiences (just as it does for non-disabled people). Thinking beyond access can allow us to expand what we value – such as qualities of comfort, spontaneity, and conviviality.

While accessibility and regulations are still important, a built environment industry which affirms disability also offers a valuable challenge to the tragedy narrative of disability. It regards disability not as a problem or as something to be cured, removed, or minimised, but as a creative way of living in the world and experiencing life. The principle of thinking and designing beyond access is about making a built environment that enables diverse disabled and other marginalised groups to thrive. From accessible infrastructure which enables mobility across cities, to rest spaces, and frequent toilets, these may feel like simple provisions, but they set the foundations for more equitable built spaces.

EXAMPLE

Offer positive representations of disabled people

London, UK, 2005

When sculptor Marc Quinn placed a statue of disabled artist Alison Lapper on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, he commented that 'the sculpture celebrates in a very public way the beauty of a different body, and makes us question the narrow binds of acceptability into which social norms tend to push us'. Since then, he has made more sculptures of her, as well as other disabled people, as part of the series *The Complete Marbles*.

Further reading: Sculpting Body Ideals: Alison Lapper Pregnant and the Public Display of Disability by Ann Millett

EXAMPLE

Provide welcoming spaces for diverse bodyminds

Bristol, UK, 2022–23

Funded by Bristol City Council, disabled performer Raquel Meseguer Zafe asked local venues to extend a warm welcome to chronically ill communities as part of her Towards a Restful City project. A series of Horizontal Events challenged the taboos around 'resting' or 'misbehaving' bodies in public spaces. As a result, three venues across the city have built rest into their spaces and activities – the Bristol Old Vic, the Arnolfini, and the Watershed.

Further reading: Chronic pain and chronic illness: A crash course in cloudspotting by Raquel Meseguer Zafe

2 START FROM THE CREATIVE POSSIBILITIES OF DISABILITY AND DIFFERENCE

Design that creatively draws on the multiplicity of human experiences has more depth and breadth. Design processes that genuinely consider the nuances of how different people experience the built environment reveal a richer and more diverse set of needs and preferences than just focusing on normative users. Embracing complexity and variety, and responding to it with creativity, is not only central to creating a positive disabled experience but also a positive experience for many people who may otherwise be marginalised or excluded by design.

By starting from disability as a creative concept, rather than just adding it at the end of the design process as a problem to be solved, commissioners, clients, designers, managers and others can be more ambitious at meeting diverse needs, and become better at considering multiplicity. This pursuit of creativity also extends far beyond the construction of a project or the wrap-up of a consultation process. The maintenance/ ownership, and sustained involvement of disabled people is vital to ensuring spaces adapt and develop in affirmative ways.

EXAMPLE

Start from deaf-centred spatial concepts to create more appropriate environments for deaf people

Exmouth UK, 2020

Advocacy by and for disabled communities can lead to design outcomes specifically suited to and affirmative of particular groups. The deaf community has long advocated for the importance of DeafSpace principles as starting points for design. For the Deaf Academy, architects Stride Treglown worked closely with staff and students to design a campus with spaces tailored to best suit the experiences of deaf people. Their approach was guided by a philosophy known as Reverse Inclusion, where access for deaf and disabled students was used as the starting point, then adapted for hearing people.

Further reading: Deaf Gain. Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity by Hansel Bauman and Joseph Murray (Eds)

EXAMPLE

Learn from how communities left out of design conversations create alternative spaces

Various venues including London's Southbank Centre, Brighton Dome, Glasgow School of Art, and Toronto's Harbour Front Centre

Brownton Abbey is an 'afrofuturistic, space-church themed performance party that centres, celebrates and elevates disabled and queer people of colour'. Performance is a practice that uses cultural space in often varied and unusual ways, it can defy conventional ideas of movement, aesthetics, and use of space. The intersectionality that is central to Brownton Abbey's work is shown not only in those who lead the collective, but in who their work is for, and how the work is made accessible, by thinking of multiple types of access in the programming of events.

Further reading: queeringborders: Tarik Elmoutawakil by Xavier de Sousa

EXAMPLE

Recognise the importance of repair and adaptative processes in enabling equitable environments

Berkeley, California, USA, 2011

When researcher Kim Kullman revisited the Ed Roberts Campus – originally designed as an exemplar of universal design centred around mobility impairments—he explored how the building and its occupants were adapting to changing conditions. He found that new forms of disability advocacy, particularly around neurodivergence and environmental sensitivities, were prompting a shift in design thinking beyond add-on access 'solutions'. For example, learning disabled caretakers manage furniture arrangements and use non-toxic cleaning fluids. Through disability-led decision making and ongoing care processes, the building continues to evolve.

Further reading: Politics of dissensus in geographies of architecture: Testing equality by Kim Kullman

3 CHANGE THE LANGUAGE

The built environment sector often uses a language of access, inclusion, reasonable adjustments, accommodations, design templates, and regulations – all of which have their place. However, as we move forward, we need to explore how this terminology can sometimes prevent the sector from also engaging more critically and creatively with disability in all its diverse and intersectional realities.

Disabled activists, scholars, artists, and architects have been challenging such language for many years. They have been critiquing normative terms which place abled-bodied people as the non-problematic centre of the world, and disabled people as a 'difficulty' on the periphery. Disabled people have been reclaiming terms with negative connotations (such as crip or mad); creating 'reverse' labels for non-disabled people such as normate and neurotypical; and offering new concepts and words that better articulate the disabled experience including crip time and spoon theory. In addition, there are many platforms working across the built environment and cultural sector to critique normative language and offer alternatives.

EXAMPLE

Explore alternative terminologies for thinking beyond access

UK and international, 2023

The DisOrdinary Architecture Project is a disability-led organisation that brings disabled creatives together with non-disabled built environment and cultural sector professionals and educators to co-develop alternative and more equitable modes of practice. Its latest publication Many More Parts Than M!: Re-imagining Disability Access and Inclusion beyond Compliance is a free downloadable compendium exploring how to engage with built environment accessibility in ways that go beyond conventional checklists, templates, design guidance, and legal compliance. Instead, the aim is to create a rich catalogue of alternative concepts, stories, artistic work, and architectural details that can creatively and critically inform design thinking and practice.

Further reading: Doing Disability Differently by Jos Boys

EXAMPLE

Ask questions about how rethinking language can help dismantle oppressive systems

London and online UK, 2022

New Architecture Writers (NAW) is a free programme for emerging design writers, developing the journalistic skill, editorial connections and critical voice of its participants. Language Barriers was a NAW event that explored inclusivity within architectural language and how to dismantle oppressive methods of communication. This collective gathering created space to discuss the ideological and material factors shaping architectural discourse: the way we discuss buildings, the tools we use, and the conditions under which such writing is produced.

Further reading: Crip Authorship: Disability as Method by Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (Eds)

4 CENTRE THE EXPERIENCES OF DISABLED AND MARGINALISED PEOPLE

Both paying attention to disabled and non-normative people's experiences and involving them from the beginning in development and design processes ensures that design is shaped from the beginning by the diversity of those experiences. This follows the edict from disabled people's campaign: 'Nothing About Us Without Us'. Rather than public consultation being used as part of a box ticking exercise, where contributors are unpaid and their input and insights undervalued, we look to more equitable and co-produced practices where participant's diverse lived experiences are central to design decision-making. Designing with disabled and other marginalised people means that protocols for equal working, training, accessible processes, timescales, and compensation must all be put in place to give disabled people a seat at the table before, during, and after the drawing board.

There are a multitude of ways of working with disabled people, whether formally and long-term through access panels, via project-based engagements, or through building sustained (and funded) relationships with disability-led organisations. Many groups are exploring more experiential engagements that go beyond surveys and 'talking shops' as these are often inaccessible for many disabled people, and can be poor at capturing the qualitative aspects of lived experience.

EXAMPLE

Involve an access panel at every stage of every project

LLDC, London, UK, 2012

The London Olympic Games helped raise the bar for inclusive design, making access and inclusion central rather than an afterthought. To support this shift, the Built Environment Access Panel (BEAP) was established to guide the LLDC in meeting its higher-than-minimum Inclusive Design Standards. BEAP is made up of both disabled and non-disabled people with vast and varied experience and knowledge of inclusive design in within a specific, local context. BEAP reviews a wide range of projects—housing, offices, leisure, education, and public spaces—through every stage. Regular engagement with panels like BEAP reflects a growing cultural appreciation for inclusive design and its benefits to society.

Further reading: A more in-depth BEAP case study can be found in here

EXAMPLE

Provide appropriate training for access panel members

Earls Court, London, UK, 2023

The Earls Court Development Company has created a Public Realm Inclusivity Panel in support of its masterplan development for a large site in West London. The panel was set up to give a voice to people who are not usually included in development, meeting once a month to act as a critical friend, inputting into the design brief and testing proposals as they are developed. Part of their engagement has been a series of workshops to develop the skills of the group so they can understand the complex challenges the masterplan needs to resolve.

Further reading: Public Realm Inclusivity Panel – Summary Report (2024)

EXAMPLE

Engage with disability-led projects that develop alternative inclusive research and development processes

The Hub, Wellcome Collection, London, UK, 2019–20

For two years (including during Covid) Heart n Soul was based at The Hub for an experimental research project led by autistic people and people with and without learning disabilities. The first part of the project involved co-developing an environment which enabled different people to explore together as equals. Participants then worked together to design research questions, undertook an inclusive survey of over 3,000 people, and collaborated with designers to imagine an inclusive future. The project considered what is important when it comes to caring and being cared for. The website of the project aimed to be fully accessible, using plain language, and lots of images and pictograms.

Further reading: In the physical to digital transition with friends – A story of performing inclusive research together no matter what life throws at you by Lilly Cook et al

EXAMPLE

Establish a co-production culture across your organisation

Hammersmith and Fulham, 2019

The London Borough of Hammersmith & Fulham (HF) has been advocating for co-production with residents through its Co-Production Matters H&F programme. The group works together to encourage and enable co-production across council departments as a means to improve decision making. Disabled individuals are at the forefront of the H&F co-production initiative because they have been often the most excluded from decision-making processes in the past.

Further reading: Equalities design: Towards post-normative equity by Natasha Trotman

5 DESIGN PLACES TO SUPPORT CARE, INTERDEPENDENCE, AND CONVIVIALITY

The stereotypical 'normal' building user remains a young, fit, unencumbered, independent, competent, and energetic person, who can pick up visual and other cues from their surroundings without thinking, does not need to notice obstacles such as uneven surfaces, level changes or unclear signage, and can easily block out design problems such as noisy rooms and overbright lights. As Tanya Titchkosky (2006) puts it, they can just go about their everyday existence as if their bodies and minds don't exist. Of course, this is not the lived experience of many, and bodies and minds change through time. This ideal is further emphasised in societies that centre individual productivity and reward intellectual prowess, competitiveness and self-improvement – simultaneously devaluing people who are not seen to display such characteristics.

As many disabled artists, activists, and scholars have argued, the answer is not to attempt to make non-normative groups 'fit' with an unforgiving world, but to instead create built surroundings that recognise human vulnerability and ageing, and emphasise care, interdependence and conviviality.

EXAMPLE

Explore new forms of housing that centre non-normative living
New York, USA

Presented as part of the exhibition Reset: Towards a New Commons at the Center for Architecture, Block Party; From Independent Living to Disability Communalism is a project created by a multidisciplinary team of disabled and non-disabled designers, artists, and educators. The project addresses the issue of housing justice through the lens of disability, provoking not only new ideas for individual housing typologies, but a community-wide strategy for collective access. Key questions asked included: 'What form might a multiracial disability community take today? What kinds of housing and public spaces could support not only "independent living" – a historic demand among disability rights advocates – but also mutual aid and communal flourishing?'

Further reading: A Different Kind of Block Party by Brett Snyder

EXAMPLE

Focus on equitable accessibility for inclusive public playgrounds

Barnet, London, UK

'FairPlay' is a fully inclusive public playground in Barnet, North London – designed to demonstrate what true accessibility looks like when disabled people's experiences lead the design process. The space welcomes children and adults, disabled and non-disabled, to play together with dignity, freedom, and joy. 'Fair Play' was built to show that inclusive design is possible in every playground – without additional cost, but with the right knowledge and intention.

The project was shaped through extensive consultation with disabled adults and children, parents, carers, and professionals working across disability. Every aspect, from the landscaping to the equipment, reflects the priorities they shared: safety, comfort, ease of navigation, and the freedom to join in without barriers. Design features include sensory panels for touch, movement and sound, quiet zones, communication boards for non-verbal children, those that speak other languages, and those with dementia, and accessible play equipment, surfacing and seating. Most importantly, it is a space where disabled and non-disabled people can play and interact together, not separately.

Current playground models exclude disabled children and adults simply because the people creating them often do not know how to design for inclusion. 'Fair Play' exists to change that – as a living, public model for councils, designers, and communities to learn from. It proves that accessibility is not specialist work – it is simply good design that brings people together.

Further reading: A Scoping Review of Evidence-Informed Recommendations for Designing Inclusive Playgrounds by Brown et al on Frontiers

EXAMPLE

Going beyond access towards ideas of conviviality and play can enhance design

London, ongoing

Inclusive Play is an ongoing project led by the Architecture Foundation Young Trustees that was initiated in response to work by the charity Scope who have campaigned for better policies for play spaces for disabled children. Through online discussions, workshops, interviews, and site research the Young Trustees are developing a guide to help architects, designers, and planners create more inclusive, accessible, and engaging play spaces in London.

The project is a clear example of how concepts beyond access – such as conviviality – can inform design. Play has become wrapped up with physical movement, putting mobility at the centre. This project has drawn from disabled experience to understand other forms that conviviality can take as well as where play and conviviality can happen. The project also asks why play should stop at a certain age. Play for teens and adults can mean access to cultural spaces, and taking conviviality as a core principle enables us to reframe what the city offers.

Further Reading: The Young Trustees

6 TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CREATING EQUITABLE ENVIRONMENTS

Typical approaches to inclusion still maintain power hierarchies between developers, architects, planners, and the end users. Useful knowledge is often ignored or lost as a project moves through the various stages, and although everyone has a responsibility for creating better spaces – not everyone is equally responsible. There is an urgent need for capacity building across built environment education and practice to increase disability awareness and knowledge, with more R&D, training, and engagement at every level.

Disabled people, if they are to be included in the planning and design of our built environment, must feel that their contribution is not only useful, but that their engagement actively informs the outcome. To ensure this, non-disabled people must be aware of their responsibilities. This includes acting as an advocate for disabled and other marginalised people and calling out discriminatory attitudes and design practices where possible. This might be through addressing the inaccessibility of their workplace, and actively supporting disabled (as well as non-disabled) colleagues through encouraging different and more flexible ways of working. It could be by developing awareness around current disability debates and campaigns, for example by following disabled advocates on social media, engaging with videos and writings by disabled creatives and groups, by inviting disabled creatives as speakers and as guests to events, and by reaching out to build networks and relationships with disability-led platforms.

EXAMPLE

Engage with disability-led organisations across built environment and cultural sectors

London, ongoing

The Deaf Architecture Front (DAF) is an example of a platform actively campaigning for improved conditions for deaf people both in built environment education and practice, and as clients and users of built spaces. The collective focuses on activism, consultation, and the creation of open-source resources. The aim of the organisation is to bridge the gap between the deaf community and the built environment industry, advocating for deaf communities. DAF was founded by deaf architectural designer Chris Laing who advocates for greater representation, support, and action in relation to Deaf architects, students and a variety of built environment professionals and deaf individuals.

Further reading: Gallaudet University's DeafSpace Design Guidelines

EXAMPLE

Expand design methods to include disability-centred approaches

Bangor, Wales, 2019–2023

Frân Wen is a church conversion for the Nyth Youth Theatre near Bangor in Wales. The winning proposal by architects Manalo and White was explained through audio-description rather than conventional architectural drawings. The architects wrote: ‘While [audio-description] is primarily prepared for people with viewingdifficulties, it also invites opportunity for a fully sighted person to see things differently and enhance their viewing experience […]. Numerous design details emerged from the process of writing the script with [the audio-describer] such as reverberation time, tactility of stonework, smell of wood, velocity of airflow […]. Our ambition for Nyth is to offer valid choices to all users with a joy and clarity in finding their way around, assured by sense of security and filled with excitement of encounters’.

Further reading: More Than Meets the Eye: What Blindness Brings to Art by Georgina Kleege

EXAMPLE

Co-develop projects that enable more equitable building typologies

Madrid, Spain, 2023

Beyond-the-family Kin housing, by Ignacio Galan and OF Architects, is a new form of intergenerational housing which utilises a mix of living configurations over three floors – creating varying levels of autonomy and interdependence. The project is intended to bring together different ages to promote care and resource sharing, as well as addressing the issue of affordability. The architects explain: ‘Beyond-the-family Kin counters constructed notions of the family house as an autonomous and stable social unit while acknowledging the relations of dependency between the inhabitants and their social and material environments’.

Further reading: How will we live together? by Hashim Sarkis

EXAMPLE

Support people to speak for themselves and listen to their insights
UK, 2017–ongoing

The Dementia Statements, developed by and with people living with dementia, established rights-based criteria essential to their quality of life, and provide a benchmark to measure the quality of services[10]. The UK Network of Dementia Voices, DEEP (Dementia Engagement and Empowerment Project), is a rights-based network encouraging people with dementia to speak out on issues that matter to them, rather than being passively consulted. It provides guidance on participation and connects with a growing community sharing lived experiences.

These initiatives underscore the importance of agency and involvement in decision-making and design, ensuring people with dementia are not ignored or devalued. Rather than being subjects of research, they are helping shape its agenda with invaluable insights.

7 WORK TOGETHER TOWARDS DISABILITY AND SPATIAL JUSTICE

Design and development choices that don't view or consider disability as important result in unjust spaces. As designers, firstly understanding and then knowing how to act in response to these principles, is vital to ensuring the spaces created do not contribute to rising spatial inequities for disabled and other marginalised communities.

Ultimately this is about moving beyond concepts of access and inclusion to a focus on disability and spatial justice. As many disabled activists and scholars have shown, disability and spatial justice aims to unravel the complex entanglements through which various marginalised groups and individuals are 'held in place' differentially and unequally, and the systems that keep them there. This can be through everyday talk and behaviours; through the spaces and objects that surround us; through social, spatial and material practices that organise access to resources in specific ways and not others; in the policies and structures through which society is maintained in a particular form; and through violence against non-normative bodies and minds.

Disability justice activists aim to move beyond identity labels to form new alliances and kinships that value and build from all our multiple ways of being in the world. Ultimately we are aiming for processes that support the redistribution of resources towards those who historically have been offered the least.

EXAMPLE

Learn about and support disability justice principles

Online and various venues USA

Sins Invalid is a disability justice-based performance project. They state: 'we will be liberated as whole beings – as disabled, as queer, as black, as gender non-conforming, as trans, as women, as men, as non-binary gendered – we are far greater whole than partitioned'. Their 10 principles of disability justice are rooted in brown, Black, and queer-bodied disabled communities, and provide a framework to critique and act against core issues experienced throughout cities, such as insufficiently accessible housing, health inequities, gentrification, unaffordability, and exclusion from social and cultural spaces and experiences.

Further reading: Skin, Tooth and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People, a Disability Justice Primer by Sins Invalid

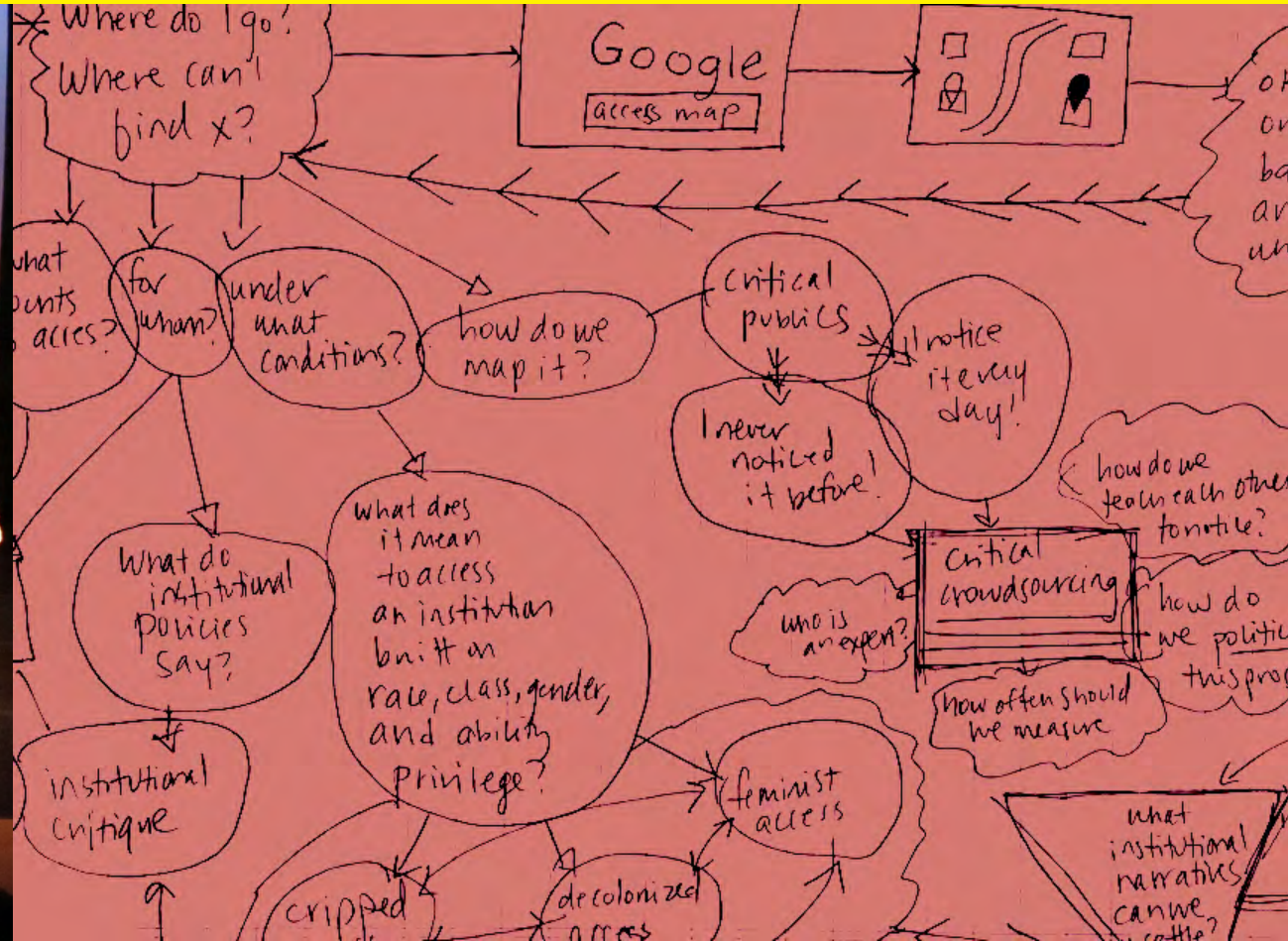
EXAMPLE

Engage with how disability justice is providing new directions for design practice

Nashville, Tennessee, USA

The Critical Design Lab, led by disabled scholar Aimi Hamraie at Vanderbilt University, is a 'multidisciplinary arts and design collaborative rooted in disability culture' – centred on the idea of liberation for disabled communities. Their wide ranging projects address the concept of access, design education, nightlife, and public space, all centred around the idea of liberation for disabled communities. Through design-thinking, the lab highlights that relying on building standards creates complacency and ignores the expertise and methodologies that disabled people can contribute.

Further reading: Building Access: Universal Design and the Politics of Design by Aimi Hamraie



PRACTICE

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Translating principles of best practice into practical steps requires challenging questions – questions of practice, theory, processes, values, and rights. We propose here a series of questions and provocations which provide this first step towards reframing and revaluing the design and delivery of space for disabled communities.

The questions are structured to follow the process of making space from imagining to sustaining. They prompt practitioners to consider what role each stage of the design process can play in the creation of more equitable spaces. Seen together, they represent the collective endeavour we must all take responsibility for and play a role in. They can help to rethink participatory design methods, identify knowledge gaps, highlight the importance of language, and encourage people-centred approaches to design. Many of these questions are vital to ensuring an approach to disability justice in space which is intersectional, rich, and meaningful.

1. IMAGINING

- **Does your project centre inclusive design?**
  - Are you supporting disability groups or collectives either financially, through mentorship, or by providing space to work?
  - Can your project propose a new model of space or engage with existing models to address disability justice more directly?
  - How do you want to foster conviviality, care, and flexibility in your project?

- **Are you practicing inclusive engagement with disability justice and advocacy groups?**
  - Are there any local disabled advocacy groups that you can engage with to initiate dialogue around local needs and desires?
  - Have you attended an early-stage design review? Was there a disabled reviewer involved? Did the discussion of your project address disability justice?

2. DEFINING THE BRIEF, PROGRAMME, AND PROJECT SET-UP

- **Have you set up your project governance and leadership to represent disabled people?**
  - Does your team include disabled people?
  - Are you using community engagement to inform the brief, ensuring that disabled people and other communities are involved right at the beginning?
  - Are you hiring disabled people or groups to contribute to your projects?

- **Have you allocated time, money, and expertise for proper scrutiny of your project?**
  - Are you engaging with access panels or community review panels in your development process?
  - Have you allowed space in your budget for access consultants, inclusive designers, or communities to engage with and review your designs?
  - When are you reviewing proposals? Is there still scope to meaningfully address disability or is the design too fixed?

– Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment or a Diversity Impact Assessment?

- **Have you considered the experience of your end users adequately?**
– Is your project displacing disabled people from their homes or neighbourhoods?
– Are you providing spaces that disabled people can use?
– Are you creating homes that disabled people can afford and live in securely?
– Does your project provide community infrastructure or amenities for disabled people and groups?
– Are you thinking beyond the red line boundary to consider who is coming to the site and how they are getting there? Have you considered who is not coming to your site, and why that may be?

3. DESIGN

- **What precedents and inspiration are informing your design?**
– How does your project provide community infrastructure or amenities for disabled people and groups? (e.g. community spaces, public disabled toilets, accessible play amenities for all ages, etc.)
– Are you allowing time and space to creatively go beyond minimum standards?

- **Who is involved in the creative process of your project?**
– What strategies can be used to make your community engagement more equitable and accessible for disabled people? Are you paying participants for their time and expertise?
– Are there clear avenues/processes/options for disabled people and communities to engage with your local authority or proposed development?
– Have you thought about upskilling architects, designers, and local authority development management officers on how to centre disabled experience?

- **How have you considered disabled people in your designs?**
- How is your project enabling disabled people to feel connected to their neighbourhood?
- How are you creating spaces that disabled people can equitably use?
- How are you designing homes that disabled people can afford and live in securely?

4. REVIEW

- **What quality of scrutiny are you allowing for?**
- Are your Design/Quality Review Panels actively trying to improve the presence and representation of disabled practitioners, and upskilling existing members?
- Do you have a community led access panel for local residents and advocates? These panels can contribute to prioritising the voices of intersectional marginalised groups such as disabled people who are younger and older, people of colour, LGBTQIA.
- What criteria are you currently using to review the accessibility of design proposals? Are these criteria varied enough?

- **Are you undertaking Post Occupancy Evaluation to understand how the project can improve?**
- How else are you measuring the impact of your design process and outcomes of the lives of disabled peopled?

5. USE AND SUSTAINMENT

- **How will you encourage local disabled people to feel and act as stewards of their space?**
  - Can disabled people/communities use, live in, work in the space you've created?
  - Is there transparent communication about how the community can be involved in terms of upkeep and continual engagement with the site? Is this resourced and secured?

- **Are appropriate policies and strategies in place to support disabled people in the longer term?**
  - How can the lessons learnt from your project be taken forward for future work?

- **Does the space allow for ongoing flexibility around inclusive design?**
  - How will the space respond/adapt to changing uses or needs of disabled people?

FURTHER RESOURCES AND RESEARCH

GROUPS TO KNOW

Deaf Architecture Front, UK
Neurodiversity Architecture Network, UK
Healing Justice London, UK
LBGTQ+ dementia advisory group, UK
Design for Disability, UK
Dementia Enquirers, UK
The DisOrdinary Architecture Project, UK
Critical Design Lab, United States
Disability Visibility Project, United States
Environmental Design Special interest Group, Dementia Alliance International
Building Diversity, Denmark
Crip Rave, Canada
Care. (ETH Zurich), Switzerland
MYCKET, UK/Sweden
Brownton Abbey, UK
My LIfe My Choice, UK

WHAT TO READ NEXT

Activist Affordances: How Disabled People Improvise More Inhabitable Worlds, ArseliDokumaci (2023)

The Architecture of Disability, David Gissen (2023)

Black Disability Politics, Sami Schalk (2022)

Building Access, Aimi Hamraie (2017)

Crip Authorship: Disability as Method
Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (2023)

Crip Genealogies
Mel Y Chen, Alson Kafer, Eunjung Kim and Julie Avril Munich, (2023)

Crip Negativity, J. Logan Smigles (2023)

Hacking the Under Ground: Disability, Infrastructure, and London's Public Transport System, Raquel Velho (2023)

Many More Parts Than M
The DisOrdinary Architecture Project (2024)

Sins Invalid 10 Disability Justice Principles (2015)

What Can a Body Do?, Sara Hendren (2020)

The Question of Access: Disability, space, meaning
Tanya Titchkosky (2011)

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A more in-depth discuss of UK Access Panels can be found here.

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p.81 Aging Better
p.83 Richard Downing, courtesy of Sins Invalid

Endnotes

1 For a full list see page 100
2 Hamraie, 2017
3 Yergeau, 2023
4 Gissen, 2023
5 Chen et al., 2023
6 Dei et al., 2000
7 Hamraie, 2023
8 Crenshaw, 2019
9 Sarkis, 2021
10 Dementia Action Alliance – DAA 2017

WORKSHOP QUOTES

Liza Fior
'The BEAP (Built Environment Access Panel) is an exemplary model, and it would be bad to lose that embedded knowledge. The BEAP represents both lived experience and local knowledge.'

James Zatka-Haas
'Access is a broad term that incorporates physical access into a building and/or space as well as less tangible elements such as "safety" or "comfort".'

Marney Walker
'I can advocate for all experiences I've encountered. The frustration lies in what stage you have the ability to advise or influence the process. We're interested in the whole process from the ground up rather than just later stages; in how can people contribute in meaningful ways.'

Mei Yee Man-Oram
'The structures, processes and RIBA stages are where people feel like they must comply with specs, but don't understand the reason why they have to or how they could be adapted to suit particular needs. Lived experience allows for a richer message.'

Rita Adeoye, LLDC
'It is vital that we engage at the procurement stage – informing briefs, ensuring disabled people and other communities are involved right at the beginning. Budgets also have to be there and factored in. encourage innovation at an early stage.'

Jordan Whitewood-Neal
'Where do the ethical responsibilities sit in our priorities? How can we engrain the need to consider access and disability within developers? How can community knowledge be used to fill that capacity gap, so you're not just relying on access consultants and designers, how can we create a new generation of disabled designers and communities who feel supported and empowered?'

Workshop participant
'There is a benefit in thinking about design in its broadest sense. The conflicts of needs can be beneficial to the end product.'

Workshop participant
'There's a difference between choosing a term to describe yourself, versus having a term "applied" to you.'

Workshop participant
'Being disabled made me focus on not fitting in but Crip allowed me to associate with a community!'

Workshop participant
'Don't be afraid to demand more and have a high barrier, that's what's going to benefit communities and make London a more liveable city.'

Workshop participant
'Disability does not exist within a vacuum.'

Workshop participant
'On the need for intersectionality, there is a tendency to only focus on one group. What happens when you have an ie non-white wheelchair user? The question then needs to be expanded and not regarded as a tick box exercise.'

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Research Team
Jordan Whitewood-Neal, Dis
James Zatka-Haas, Dis
Carly Dickson, RAWE Project
Chris Scarffe, Universal Design Studio
Marney Walker, Independent Occupational Therapist

GLA Team
Amanprit Arnold, Sarah Considine, Phoebe Crockford, Jamie Dean, Evangelia Georgali, Kate Gordon, Natalie Gordon, Riina Heinonen, Ellie Howard, Rachel Howsen, Anna Kaskanlian, Sara Khan, Raja Moussauoi, Nicola Murphy-Evans, Mathieu Proctor, Ash Rao, Kathryn Timmins

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Chris Laing, Founder, Deaf Architecture Front, DAF
Rachel Smalley, Head of Inclusive Design, Jacobs

Special thanks
Olivia Benjamin, Liza Fior, Eliza Grosvenor, Guy Harris, Amy Hayward, Erin Hutching, Dan Innes, Dieter Kleiner, Poppy Levison, Stu Napier, Emma Naylor, Jessica Ryan Ndegwa, Mei Yee Man Oram, Mandy Redvers-Rowe, Ronald Amanze, Kat Scott, Niyanta Sharma, Adam Thomas, Lydia Toohey, Simone West, Gemma Wheeler, Pareisse Wilson, Jane Wong

Published by
Greater London Authority
City Hall, Kamal Chunchie Way
London E16 1ZE

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