

# Design Museum Magazine

## The Inclusive Design Issue

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# From the Editor.

This issue of *Design Museum Magazine* will not be our last on inclusive design. We hope this issue will inspire conversations about inclusive design—the good, the bad, and the complicated. The inspiration for this issue came through discussions with staff and our community on how design and structures of oppression affect all parts of any design process. Everything is designed, and therefore everything can be dismantled and redesigned.

Redesigning everything can feel like drinking from a firehose. That is why we are taking small sips. Our graphic designer, Sarah Ho, discovered several accessibility settings in Adobe Illustrator that help creatives design for people with color blindness. Sarah created a color palette for the cover so people with and without color blindness would have a similar visual experience. A sip. Sarah also enlarged the font without compromising the integrity of the layout, disproving the common falsehood that accessibility compromises design. A gulp.

We have gathered a variety of voices to help us understand the historical and contemporary definitions of inclusive design, demonstrate practical applications and strategies around inclusive design, and offer stories of inclusive design in the built environment, work, and life.

This issue also discusses how, like any other area of design, inclusive design initiatives are flawed when they exclude BIPOC, Queer, and Disabled perspectives in the design process, which not only perpetuates harm to those groups but also limits and undercuts the work. Inclusive design is an ongoing practice in learning. I am grateful to other individuals, organizations, and resources we look to for wisdom in this regard. Alice Wong's *Disability Visibility Podcast* and Sins Invalid's *Disability Justice Primer Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People*, are essential to understanding this work.

Thank you for reading.

Let's continue the conversation about designing for an inclusive future.

J.R. Uretsky,  
*Curator & Director of Programs*

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# Contributors.

## **Aidan Borer**

*Vice President, Global Service Innovation, CSpace*

Aidan has dedicated the last decade to enhancing organizational growth through improved products and experiences. He is passionate about sustainable, equitable solutions, and he collaborates with various entities for social and commercial impact.

## **Nicole Cuff**

*Principal, Acentech*

Nicole helps users, architects and engineers make informed project decisions regarding sound isolation, room acoustics, and mechanical system noise control. She has worked in the built environment for more than 20 years, and serves as Acentech's K-12 Education Market Leader.

## **Donna Dawson**

*Co-founder and VP of Student Engagement, Innovators for Purpose (iFp)*

Donna possesses a deep passion for both art and the art-making process. She is dedicated to guiding young people on their journey of unlocking and nurturing their creative potential.

## **Michael K. Dawson**

*Co-Founder and CEO, Innovators for Purpose (iFp)*

Michael is dedicated to catalyzing a more equitable society.

## **Tom Harkin**

*Ex-Officio Member Senator (Retired)*

Senator Harkin represented Iowa in the United States Congress. Tapped by Senator Ted Kennedy to craft legislation to protect the civil rights of millions of Americans with disabilities, Tom's work resulted in the creation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

## **Josephine Holmboe**

*Creative Director, Fidelity Center for Applied Technology*

After 20+ years of leading design teams in marketing, education, and financial services, Josephine embraces a Human-Centered Design practice as the core foundation for designing meaningful, powerful, and innovative solutions and the key behind strategic problem-solving for the best user experience possible.

## **Holst Architecture & Hannah Silver**

Holst Architecture is a Portland-based, woman-owned, queer-led design studio devoted to creating meaningful architecture that people love. Inclusive Design Facilitator Hannah Silver brings a broad understanding of health, equity, and sustainability best practices to her design education and community engagement. Images, left to right: Hannah Silver, Monse Fonseca, Rae Weston, Kate Brown with Fern the cat.

## **A.J. Johannes**

*Inclusive Design Strategist, Interbrand*

A.J. was the 2012 Paralympic Bronze medalist, TedX speaker, Board member of Adaptive Sports New England, Co-lead of U.S. chapter of Omnicom's Disability ERG, Open Disability, and served as a member of United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee (USPOC) Social Racial Justice Task Force.

## **Jason Kruse**

*Associate, BNIM*

Jason is an architect who is committed to the connection between people and place. He believes it takes an interdisciplinary team to create innovative and human-centered design solutions, and this approach was deeply embedded in the design of The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center at Drake University.

## **Risham Nadeem**

*Business Director, CSpace*

Risham is a Strategy Director with a background that spans innovation, brand strategy, and management consulting. She's long been interested in DEI and looks forward to working with brands to create value for historically marginalised consumers.

## **Kevin Nordmeyer**

*Principal, BNIM*

Kevin brings over 30 years of design experience and leadership to his work. He received the A.I.A Iowa Medal of Honor for his continued contributions to the profession and leadership in sustainable, inclusive design.



## **Anne Petersen**

*Co-lead, Federal Design System*

Anne's work spans 20+ years, across experience design, research, strategy, and content. Currently co-lead of the U.S. Web Design System, they previously led design at digital agencies—including at 18F, a federal consultancy—as well as in higher education, at Penn State and UIC.

## **Anne Riggs**

*Associate/Inclusive Design Lead,  
David Baker Architects*

Anne is an architect and Certified Access Specialist (CASP) based in Los Angeles, California. As the Inclusive Design Lead for David Baker Architects, she is committed to designing housing that embodies an ethic of care—creating uplifting, equitable, and sustainable environments for all.

## **E.T. Russian**

*Multi-sensory Artist & Cartoonist*

E.T.'s animation, sculpture, writing, and soundscapes explore themes of living and dying. Russian's work is in the permanent Library of Congress and WA State Convention Center collections and has been shown in the National Library of Medicine.

## **Nedret Sahin**

*Director, Experience Strategy, BORN XDS*

Nedret has over 12 years experience as a strategist, researcher, and designer. She excels in designing for complex environments in need of transformation. She believes all systems are designed and advocates for those most underserved by them.

## **Jennifer C. Schmidt**

*AIA, WELL AP, Architect, Gensler*

Jennifer is a registered architect with ten years of experience. She brings a commitment to sustainability and occupant wellness to clients including national corporations, public school districts, and the U.S. military. Originally from the midwest, Jennifer joined Gensler Boston in Spring 2021.

**Emma Stone**

*Graduate Student, Harvard/MIT*

Emma is an aspiring social innovator driven by the need to serve and an eagerness to solve tough problems creatively. She is currently a dual degree student in policy and business at Harvard and MIT focused on designing accessible solutions with and for the disabled community.

**Kamara Sudberry**

*Global Inclusive Design Leader, Steelcase*

Kamara leverages her background in systems change and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion work, as well as her passion for collaboration and design thinking to drive inclusive actions and better outcomes in the workplace and beyond.

**Kelsey Werner**

*Strategist, Born XDS*

Kelsey brings a unique perspective to strategic design drawing on her background in participatory research, systems science and social work. She is currently a strategist at BORN XDS (formerly Mad\*Pow) and an academic affiliate of the Social System Design Lab.

**Amy Wicks**

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Amy is a strategist with a background in marketing, content strategy and human-centered design. She currently serves as the Director of CX & Strategy for Health and Life Sciences at BORN XDS (previously Mad\*Pow).

# Design for Everyone

## Where to Begin?

by Jennifer C. Schmidt

We, as architects and designers, have the power to influence the public experience of the built environment. As professionals licensed by our jurisdictions with the aim of maintaining health, safety, and welfare, it is our duty to create spaces that everyone can access and enjoy. Accessible design is an ancestor of the current trend for wellness design and should be the foundation of every code-compliant space or building. The Americans with Disabilities Act has made significant contributions to mainstream design, but the regulations are the minimum, more can and should be done. Through our work, architects should reinforce the importance of accessible design as a holistic process, from the way we communicate with clients and the public to developing design ideas at all project stages and formal review of the construction documents, not just mandated code requirements integrated into the final building design. Prioritizing the incorporation of accessible design throughout the entire design process results in more equitable placemaking and supports the basic position that people with disabilities belong in every facet of modern society.

According to the World Health Organization, 1.3 billion people, or 1 in 6 worldwide, experience significant disability. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reports that 1 in 4 adults, or 61 million Americans, have a disability that impacts major life activities. Whether congenital or through injury or aging, or as a caretaker, most people will experience living with a disability or assisting a loved one with a disability as they navigate the world. Despite being one of the larger minority groups, acceptance and accommodations often lack progress. Before Congress passed the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, access to the built environment was not guaranteed or expected and was regulated by a patchwork of sparse laws and special one-offs as needed. As a result, to this day, many spaces are not accessible, and the work of confirming access is placed squarely on the disabled person as they maneuver the world and demand equal access.

Most states and jurisdictions have enshrined the ADA regulations into their own local codes, while others have their own unique regulations. Enforcement of accessibility codes can range from local plan reviewers to civil litigation. Where we practice, there is also compliance in overlapping scenarios covered through the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board (MAAB) regulations chapter 521 CMR. In Massachusetts, architects and designers should have a working knowledge of both, as they are complementary but not identical.

**But who are the accessibility codes really for, and do they make the built environment equitable for everyone?**

Accessibility codes have been a tremendous boon to provide access for many who had no previous legal recourse. Over the course of

the twentieth century, acceptance of people with disabilities has dramatically transformed, in no small part due to the improved access and integration with society that the ADA supports. The ongoing development of access in the United States and other countries provides rights hard won, but there is room for improvement.

Most accessibility code language focuses on people with physical disabilities, specific to wheelchair users with upper body strength or the wherewithal to afford a powered chair; and to a lesser extent, people with vision impairment. There is opportunity to go above and beyond the ADA regulations, and it is our responsibility as architects to make life better for the 26% of Americans with disabilities.

The ADA regulation language focuses on two groups listed above, however, the full legislation defines people with disabilities to include cancer patients, people with diabetes, asthma, PTSD, autism, cerebral palsy, food allergies, migraines, chronic pain disorders, deafness or hearing loss, low vision to blindness, epilepsy, mobility disabilities that required use of walker or cane, intellectual disabilities, major depressive disorders, and traumatic brain injury.

To assume that the built environment cannot respond to or support people with the preceding list of disabilities is tremendously limiting of a profession that thrives on creativity and problem solving in three dimensions. Merely meeting the letter of the current accessibility building codes does not equal making the lived experience of disabled populations comparable to a non-disabled person: a lot of people are left behind and left out. I challenge my colleagues, nationwide and globally, to go above and beyond, ask questions, and educate themselves.

## How do accessible design features impact all our lives everyday?

Many everyday building elements are greatly influenced by the ADA regulations, and people born in the later decades of the 20th century and onward are used to seeing them in contemporary spaces without realizing they are important tools for access.

- Intuitive door hardware – following the passage of the ADA, round twist doorknobs are no longer allowed in public spaces. The lever-style hardware and standard force required to open is ubiquitous now, the experience of opening a door has become intuitive.
- Standardization of handrails on stairs and ramps minimize injury for everyone while providing a lifeline for people with extra mobility or balance needs.
- Increased elevator requirements – people in wheelchairs, caregivers, people who push children in strollers all benefit from increased integration into more spaces with the proliferation of required elevators.
- The single user accessible restroom, champion of multi-population accommodation, is not just for people who use wheelchairs, but also great for people who need to change a diaper or their clothes, empty a colostomy bag, privacy to give insulin shots or do ritual washing for religious practice, for those experiencing gastric distress, and also a refuge for someone excluded by gendered restrooms.

## **Where does the code fail us?**

People with disabilities did not ask for a default building standard that leaves them out, and they deserve to fully participate in society. While lengthy, building codes can only passively respond to accessibility needs. In many cases, policy needs to catch up as well. When we talk about the additional burden placed upon people with a disability, including but not limited to:

- Being forced to share sensitive medical information with coworkers/supervisors/strangers, to gain access, essentially having to educate everyone you encounter on your limits and abilities.
- Not given consideration for higher paying full-time employment due to stereotypes or fear of needing to take additional medical leave.
- Acquiring affordable personal or medical assistance, custom mobility devices not covered by insurance, equipment needed to stay alive.
- Needing to research/call ahead to verify if locations are fully accessible or not, having to locate unclear accessible routes, waiting for use of occupied accessible spaces/facilities when they make up only a small percentage of options.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act was groundbreaking in the standardization of accessibility standards in the building code, it can

be slow to update and, in some cases, entirely silent on some notable populations. There can be a mindset among some architects and designers that accessibility code elements are an extra when they should be baseline. The architect is not an ally to the disability community when some code loopholes are exploited, two examples are listed below.

- The ADA allows for separate solutions. Grand main building entries up a flight of monumental stairs were a hallmark of American civic architecture of the 19th and 20th centuries. If you are unable to climb stairs, you may find yourself having to circle the building until you locate a side or back entry, which is hopefully clearly labeled and unlocked, to gain entry via ramp or lift. An accessible route that is not intuitively located may meet the letter of the code, but the experience is not equitable. When designers accept a longer path, a secondary, circuitous “accessible route,” people with disabilities have been othered by architecture.
- In some cases, lack of access is allowed under the ADA. Some spaces are grandfathered in, or allowed to be exempt from certain requirements. In some jurisdictions, multilevel residential buildings do not have to provide elevators under certain conditions. However, many people do not plan on becoming disabled and will find themselves needing improved access.



## **Best practices for integrating an accessibility-positive mindset throughout the design process**

- Educate yourself on politically correct terminology surrounding disability. Respect the terms used by a person with disabilities if they feel comfortable self-identifying. Examples of outdated terms include “handicapped” or “wheelchair bound,” aim for “person with disabilities,” and “person who uses a wheelchair.”
- Consider the accessibility of all design collateral produced during the design process. At completion of construction, the building should be accessible but in the course of your work, aim for inclusivity with every document, presentation, and email along the way.
- View the ADA, and in Massachusetts, MAAB CMR 521, as the code-minimum lowest bar of accessible design.
- Engage with people with disabilities in design meetings and throughout the design process where appropriate.
- If you are on the other end of the AIA contract as a property owner or developer, seek to hire architects who are committed to championing accessibility.
- Projects should be reviewed at all major milestones in project delivery for appropriate accessibility benchmarks. Within your firm, formalize an accessibility-specific QA/QC checklist parallel to your regular reviews. Accessibility code should be the baseline, not an afterthought.

- Building codes, including the full ADA language with graphic diagrams, are available on the internet. Everyone who works in design should prioritize developing a working knowledge. I encourage younger architects that memorizing door clearance, handrail extension, or tactile braille signage standards should be a strong part of your personal brand.
- If you are in a position to mentor younger people in the architectural profession, be the model of inclusion and equity; and maintain an actively positive attitude about the ADA. Design professionals inhabit a position of authority, we have a lot of power to shape the space that many thousands will occupy over decades. Use that privilege for good.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act was groundbreaking at its inception, architects should challenge and surpass the basic level of regulations. The accessible design regulations should cover a wider range of needs and should be enforced with fewer exemptions. Prioritizing the incorporation of accessible design throughout the entire design process results in more equitable placemaking and supports the basic position that people with disabilities belong in every facet of modern society. Architects and designers should be assertive supporters of wider accessible design, and advocate for the disability community in all of their work.

# How Can We Design for Disabled Joy?

by Hannah Silver & Holst Architecture Staff

[An image of two people sitting on a curved bench made from concrete, communicating using sign language. The seating is Deaf-friendly because its curved nature makes signing easier, and the sturdy benches made from solid materials are fat-friendly.]

We all deserve to take up space and participate in our communities! Unfortunately, for many people with disabilities (at least 26% of the population), barriers in the built environment severely limit where people can go. For someone using a rolling mobility device, encountering one step in the doorway of a beautiful flower shop may mean they simply do not get to visit the store like everyone else.

The ADA Standards for Accessible Design is a federal document that sets the minimum requirements for making buildings and other shared spaces inclusive of disabled people. However, many peoples' needs fall outside the ADA's requirements, and older buildings often have not been updated to meet code.

In 2020, Holst Architecture's Inclusive Design Facilitator, Hannah Silver, began a research and engagement project called Design for Disabled Joy. The goal was to learn directly from diversely disabled people about how architects and others who design buildings can go "above and beyond the ADA" to meet peoples' access needs. Most importantly, we asked people how designers can support disabled joy.

We asked people where they loved to go and where they wished they could go to have an enjoyable time in their everyday lives. Through surveys and interviews, we uncovered lots of great design ideas and areas for improvement. We distilled our findings into **8 Ways to Design for Disabled Joy**.

When we design to meet disabled peoples' needs, we also benefit people pushing strollers, kids, short people, tall people, plus size folks, and many others! But it is also important to remember that sometimes peoples' needs can be very specific to themselves, and that is still worthy of designers' attention. People with very specific needs in space have the most to gain from newfound accessibility.

# 8 Ways to Design for Disabled Joy

**1. Better (and More) Bathrooms.** You never know when you'll need a restroom! It's easier to go out when you can expect a comfortable bathroom experience. Bathroom needs go beyond using the toilet. Look for spacious stalls, adult-sized changing tables, and thoughtfully located grab bars.

**2. Equal Entry.** Secondary access doesn't feel good – let's make sure we can all get in the front door fairly, and move through the building or space without issue. Stairs and elevators should be near each other, and ramps can replace stairs.

**3. More Chairs, Everywhere.** Some of us need to rest more often than others, and providing a variety of inclusive seating types goes a long way. Look for different heights and widths of chairs, with and without arms.

**4. The Space Between.** The way we arrange furniture can help or hinder movement and access. The ADA doesn't cover furniture unless it's built into the building. As you move through a space or building, think about whether two wheelchair users could comfortably pass each other in corridors.

**5. Clear Navigation.** There are lots of ways to make space easier to comprehend and move through, starting with accessible signage and including creative ways to add multisensory cues to a layout.

**6. Balance Sensory Inputs.** We all process sensory inputs differently, and some of us don't use vision or hearing. By applying thoughtfulness to finish colors, textures, and materials, as well as sound and lighting, we can support all of our sensory needs.

**7. Dynamic Design.** We don't always need the same things – so malleability and options go a long way. Providing a variety of space types supports varying needs, especially for neurodivergent folks who need retreat. Providing furniture that adjusts, or control over a room, increases agency.

**8. Digital Bridge.** Sometimes the preferred way to access a space is remotely. We can also make space more accessible by simply letting people know what to expect before they arrive!

[An image of five people and one dog walking on a wide sidewalk. Extra wide sidewalks help Deaf people, mobility device users, and plus-size individuals pass each other comfortably. Audible and tactile crosswalk signal helps Blind and Deaf people cross the street.]

# What makes this public space inclusive?

[An image of the One North building's courtyard in Portland, OR, with highlighted elements that make public spaces inclusive: Rollable places, fat-friendly furniture, Deafscape design, and Indigenous cultural connection. Elements noted but not featured in the image include sensory sensitive options, BIPOC-designed art, and queer friendly spaces.]

# What makes this public space inclusive?

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Find more ideas on the next page!

# Let's do a scavenger hunt! What inclusive design can you find in your neighborhood?

Want to find out if the urban design around you supports disabled joy? Bring this checklist, a pen, and something that rolls (a stroller, bike, or even roller skates) to test for “rollable spaces.” Check off the items below as you find them!

## Disabled Joy

1. Publicly available family-sized all-gender restrooms support people with complex disabilities. **BONUS:** adult changing table!
2. Curb cuts with truncated domes (bumps) for wheelchairs and traffic safety for low-vision / Blind folks.
3. Buildings with automatic doors and level doorways for convenient wheeled access.
4. Dog-friendly design like water bowls to support service animals.
5. Safe crosswalks with audible and tactile (vibrating) signals.



6. COVID-19 design responses for our immunocompromised friends.
7. Sensory retreat space supports people with Autism and dementia.

### **More Inclusive Design**

8. Fat-friendly furniture like sturdy benches, chairs without arms, moveable items, and a mix of seating options.
9. Queer-friendly spaces, usually indicated with rainbows/signage.
10. A street named after a non-male person or a statue of a non-male person.
11. Art that highlights Black joy or celebrates non-European cultures.
12. Indigenous language or art to honor local stewards of the land.
13. Kid-sized/kid-friendly design because parents and kids go everywhere.
14. Public drinking water since not everyone has a kitchen sink.

# What we found...

Design for disabled joy is just one aspect of inclusive urban design. We can do much more to make buildings and outdoor spaces welcoming to everyone!

Here are some of the inclusive design features we found in the Eliot neighborhood near One North, a Holst building project.

- Curb cuts & truncated domes
- Sensory retreat
- Mix of seating options
- Covid-19 precautions
- Vibrating Crosswalk signal
- Dog-friendly design

## Rollable Spaces

- Level surfaces
- Ramps instead of stairs

Want to learn more about Design for Disabled Joy and other inclusive design strategies? Visit [holstarc.com/news/disabled-joy](https://holstarc.com/news/disabled-joy)

# Accessibility & Inclusion in Housing Design

by Anne Riggs

In the United States, “accessible” has become a legally defined term denoting compliance with minimum required standards for programs, places, and products to be usable by people with disabilities. These standards include federal civil rights legislation such as the well-known Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and the 1968 Fair Housing Act, as well as various state and local building codes. The ADA and related laws have been critical in guaranteeing basic civil rights for people with disabilities. While compliance with these minimum standards does ensure a valuable baseline of access, the reality is that it does not result in truly usable and enjoyable environments.

This accessibility legislation uses a precise, narrow legal definition of what it means for an environment to be considered accessible and is based on anthropometric research and metrics initially conducted in the mid-20th century. As designers creating spaces for people under these guidelines, we can fall short of our ethical

obligations to design with empathy, compassion, and awareness of how unconscious bias and/or ableism—the limitations of our personal experience—may negatively impact our designs.

In the design of homes, it is especially important to provide environments that support residents to carry out their daily needs with dignity and joy. Even new homes that comply with minimum requirements may not provide a level of access that truly acknowledges residents' right to live full lives in their homes. For example, in ADA-compliant homes with more than one bathroom, only one fully accessible bathroom is required. In the other bathrooms, designers often fail to provide space for a wheelchair to enter the room and turn around. For privately funded homes that are only subject to the less restrictive Fair Housing Act, a wheelchair turning space in bathrooms is not even required. Imagine designing a custom home that did not allow your client to physically enter every room!

All aspects of the built environment—from stair height and door width to the design of doorknobs and handles—have evolved over time to accommodate a specific range of human sizes and abilities. As designers, we make conscious decisions about these and other items in all of our work that determine who we include and who we exclude.

Even communities that provide a high level of accessibility to individual homes can still contribute to the segregation and exclusion of individuals with disabilities. If all of the required accessible units and common spaces are on the ground floor, the ADA does not

require an elevator to allow access to the upper stories of an apartment building. This excludes residents who can't climb stairs from enjoying equal opportunities for relationships with their neighbors and community. It also means that guests with limited mobility may be unable to visit family and friends living in upper level units.

The concept of universal design, coined by architect and accessibility advocate Ronald L Mace in the 1970s, seeks to end segregation based on disability, and encourages environments that exceed the minimum requirements of the ADA and incorporate enhanced accessibility features as a core component of their design philosophy. Universal design promotes seven broad principles that designers should follow to create environments that allow for equity, flexibility, simplicity, and ease of use for people with a broad range of abilities.

The term “inclusive design” is often—I believe inaccurately—used interchangeably with “universal design.” As an affordable housing architect serving residents who have often experienced systemic injustice and trauma, I see inclusive design as a tool to integrate design for disability as a core component of an ethical commitment to justice, equity, diversity and inclusion. Inclusive design includes a critical shift from a prescriptive approach to a consensus-based approach, valuing and centering the voices of those most affected by the work. It benefits not only individuals with a wide range of abilities, but also extends those benefits to everyone, including people of different ages, family status, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Inclusive design incorporates concerns beyond physical access, recognizing the need for environments

that are not only accessible, but also welcoming, dignified, and reflective of occupants' identities and needs.

Through the inclusive design process, we invite and lift up the voices of people of all different abilities and perspectives, whose experiences and expertise are most relevant to those our buildings will ultimately serve. My favorite tool in this approach is the Inclusive Design Focus Group, a structured interaction following guidelines created by The Kelsey, a non-profit disability advocacy organization based in San Francisco. These simple but powerful workshops invite project-specific participants, such as local service and community organizations and neighbors—including individuals with diverse abilities—to an open-ended discussion of priorities and considerations that they believe are most important to a successful, inclusive community. Each workshop I've participated in has been a rewarding experience that successfully identified considerations specific to the project at hand, and also helped me become a better, more responsive designer moving forward on future projects.

The beauty of adopting inclusive design practices is the opportunity to learn something new with each conversation. It's impossible to simply write a checklist of building features that can be incorporated to complete an inclusive design, you have to engage with the specifics of your project. That said, I can share some illustrative examples of what I have learned through this practice.

The ADA requires a certain number of parking spaces to be accessible and for a certain percentage of those to be a wider van-accessible stall that allows wheelchair-accessible vehicles to load and unload.

Unfortunately, there is no special designation for vans that reserves the larger spaces for folks who need them. People who need to unload a wheelchair may be completely unable to access a facility if a van-accessible parking space is unavailable. These spaces are only 4 feet wider than a standard accessible stall, so I now recommend finding the space to make more stalls van-accessible whenever possible. Also, many individuals with disabilities use paratransit services, which need a temporary loading area to park while the driver collects passengers and assists them in loading. These vehicles may need to pick up more than one client, so providing a comfortable, safe waiting area with a bench near the loading zone is helpful while passengers wait.

Accessibility regulations prioritize basic facility access for people with mobility, hearing, and vision impairments, which is, of course, critically important. However, the spectrum of ability is much more diverse and intersectional than what is reflected in these codes. Features that people might not associate with disability access can actually provide benefits to everyone, including people with diverse abilities. For example, countertops and floors that are easy to clean—without gaps or textures—make life a great deal easier for a wide range of people. They are great for families with pets or children; people caring for service and emotional support animals; people with increased personal hygiene or toileting needs; and neurodiverse individuals who benefit psychologically from an environment that is both easy to clean and that appears clean and orderly. As another example, intuitive and clear space planning and signage designed to support blind and low-vision users also makes it easier for language learners and neurodiverse guests to navigate in the environment.

As an architect working for a firm that designs hundreds of homes per year, my goal is to advocate for inclusive design practices in all our work. David Baker Architects has joined The Kelsey as a Committed Firm dedicated to promoting inclusive design for housing. We are currently undertaking several pilot projects utilizing The Kelsey's new Housing Design Standards for Accessibility and Inclusion, developed through extensive work with a stakeholder advisory group. I encourage all designers working on housing, and anyone interested in learning more about inclusive design, to visit **[thekelsey.org](http://thekelsey.org)** for more information and resources.



# What Do You Want? I Got You

by E.T. Russian

*What Do You Want? I Got You* is a comic created in 2023 by E.T. Russian that depicts three scenarios. A person in a wheelchair is roasting food over a firepit and asking, “Corn? Green beans? They’re a little burnt, but it adds flavor.” There are two people looking out from their tent saying, “yum!” Narrator: Rasar State Park opened in 1990, the first year of the A.D.A. The firepits, showers, toilets, they are all accessible, even the path down to the river. Three people that differ in size and ability make their way down a sloped path to the shoreline.

Narrator: Sometimes art areas and play spaces are not accessible. The Sea Glass Carousel is not one of those places. The seats of the carousel are shaped like sea creatures and are accessible via a ramp. An individual points to an extended ramp and exclaims, “Everybody rides here,” then asks, “Need a stool to get up?” Narrator: If only all spaces had these features. Images depict braille, large print, headphones, QR codes with audio tours, touchable art, quiet, low stimulation areas, captioning, and art hung lower so more people can experience it.

Narrator: Friend hangouts take a different kind of negotiating. Which, of course, is worth it. Two friends, each in their own homes, hang out via video call. A person with long black hair sits in bed drawing. A cell phone is propped next to the individual as they say, “Hi bud, I want to hang, but I’m too sick to leave the house,” to an individual with orange hair and a beard painting a vase of flowers on a canvas held up by an easel. The painter asks, “Wanna do a video hangout instead?” The two friends watch a video together. One asks, “How should we do this?” The other replies, “I’ll count 3-2-1 go! We’ll both press play at the same time.” The friends laugh together at their individual laptops. One exclaims, “OMG! What was she thinking?” and the other laughs and says, “Never trust the cruise director.”

# Innovators for Purpose

## Where Inclusion, Design, & Youth Empowerment Converge

by Michael K. Dawson & Donna Dawson

### **Michael**

Growing up in an under-resourced neighborhood without many mentors to help uncover my potential, my vision of the future was exceedingly limited. However, during my junior year of high school, a transformative moment occurred. A guidance counselor, not even my own, tapped me on the shoulder, recommending an after-school program. This encounter shattered my narrow worldview and propelled me to pursue a B.S. and M.S. in Electrical Engineering and live a life I never imagined. Several decades later, we would start Innovators for Purpose (iFp) to challenge mindsets and to be that pivotal shoulder tap that can open new worlds of possibilities for our students.

### **Pioneering Change in Cambridge**

iFp is a BIPOC-led non-profit design and innovation studio in Cambridge, MA. Our mission is to empower young people, especially

those from historically marginalized groups, to become innovators capable of reshaping their communities and the world. Through our initiatives, we contribute to expanding a diverse talent pool pursuing high-impact career pathways.

Our partnership with Fletcher Maynard Academy was the initial step, bringing us face-to-face with the stark disparities within the most economically challenged neighborhood of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Remarkably the school is only two blocks from MIT and a single subway stop away from Harvard, Pfizer, Johnson and Johnson, Moderna, Microsoft, Google, and other industry giants are a short walk away. Young people walk past these institutions daily, unaware of the life-changing opportunities inside. The stark contrast between abundant opportunities and a lack of awareness is jarring.

During our first focus group, thought-provoking questions from a 5th grader shook us to the core. She asked, “Why aren’t our immigration laws fairer? How come there is so much racism in the U.S.? And why is gentrification causing my friends to move away?”

If there were any doubt, to be successful, we would have to design “with” rather than “for” the community to make a difference.

## **The Power of Art and Empathy**

### **Donna**

When we started iFp there wasn’t much talk about incorporating Art into STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math). As an artist and art educator, I’ve witnessed the transformative power of art, and how it can bridge gaps, inspire, and communicate emotions

that words often fail to express. Back when I was teaching in public schools, the art room was a sanctuary for creativity. It was a space where students felt valued, and their artwork reflected that sense of worth.

As we contemplated how to amplify our impact, the fusion of Art and Design seemed a natural progression. Yet, it was in that pivotal conversation with the 5th grader that we uncovered a deeper truth. How many times had she shared her story? More importantly, who had truly listened?

It was at that moment that I realized that one of my superpowers, empathy, had to be a pillar that the organization was built on. I often say that “kids and dogs like me.” They can sense my empathetic nature radiating from within me. This innate ability to connect with young minds and furry friends has been an integral part of my identity. What’s particularly intriguing is that the business world is now recognizing what creatives have known for years – empathy lies at the core of innovation.

With this realization, we embraced empathy as a core value and embarked on a journey to empower young innovators. This was a defining moment in our journey, where the fusion of empathy with Art, Design, Science, and Technology became our guiding force.

## **Empowering Young Innovators**

While the questions raised by the 5th grader initially sparked apprehension, they were eventually embraced. Collaborating with

the school's Principal, we formulated the guiding question that would reframe our pilot: "How Might We be Part of a Changing Neighborhood?"

Over 80 students from the 3rd, 4th, and 5th grades embarked on this journey, engaging with local influencers, including the Mayor, City Councilors, and business leaders. They conducted user research, distilled insights, ideated creative solutions, built prototypes, received feedback, and refined their concepts.

Through this process, we discovered the remarkable capacity of young minds to devise solutions that resonate deeply with them, validating our core ethos.

iFp has become a living testament to the idea that true innovation often emerges organically, shaped by the ebb and flow of thoughtful design and unwavering dedication to improvement. We've wholeheartedly embraced this evolutionary journey, adapting our approach through an ongoing process of iteration, and, perhaps most crucially, by actively listening to the voices of our young people.

## **iFp Studios: Shaping Dreams**

Our programming has evolved significantly. We now begin with 7th graders and continue into college. At the core of our offerings is iFp Studios, though often referred to as a program, it is much more than that.

iFp Studios is a fully-fledged design and innovation studio, a place where emerging innovators collaborate closely with seasoned professionals. This collaboration unfolds within our multidisciplinary framework, seamlessly incorporating art, design, science, and technology. Together, they engage in real-world projects initiated by students and sponsored by clients, all aimed at advancing equity and catalyzing positive change. This year-round, paid, work-based learning experience effectively blurs the boundaries between high school, college, and career preparation.

iFp Studios represents the embodiment of our innovative approach, offering students a unique platform to shape their own dreams while making a positive impact on their community.

Our projects are strategically located in some of Cambridge's most highly trafficked places. Our most recent projects examined systems of inequity including the "Looking Glass" sculpture in Kendall Square and "This Should Not Be," a groundbreaking campaign against systemic racism, sponsored by the Cambridge Public Library, following the tragic incident of George Floyd's murder.

These projects not only transform physical spaces but also reshape the narratives surrounding equity and inclusion.

## **Measuring Our Impact**

Our commitment doesn't end with projects but extends to supporting our students in their academic and career pursuits, where we've achieved remarkable success.

We support student transition to post-secondary with college application support, portfolio development, letters of recommendation, references for internships before graduating high school, and more.

We are achieving exceptional outcomes. All students who actively participate in iFp for a minimum of two years and maintain their commitment through high school graduation successfully enroll in college. Remarkably, half of our students pursue STEM fields, more than twice the national average, while a quarter pursue design, a discipline increasingly intertwined with STEM.

### **The iFp Essence: Inclusivity, Design, Empowerment**

As you can see, there are many layers to our success. iFp epitomizes a groundbreaking fusion of inclusion, design, and youth empowerment. Diverse participation, engaging marginalized groups, and addressing inequities is in our DNA (inclusion). Our journey, sparked by a fifth-grader's questions, defied the norm and embraced the unexpected. From that moment, we learned that true innovation thrives at the intersection of diverse minds and ideas (design). Our work has not only unlocked pathways to STEM and design but has forged connections, ignited passions, and given young innovators the tools to shape their destinies (empowerment).

### **Join Us in Shaping the Future**

iFp transcends the boundaries of being merely a Design or STEM program. It's a vibrant, diverse community where emerging artists,



designers, scientists, technologists, and other purpose-driven youth collaborate with dedicated adult mentors.

Our story illustrates that diversity isn't just a checkbox; it's the essence of who we are, woven into the fabric of every project, reflected in the guidance of every mentor, and embodied in the dreams and aspirations of every participant.

As we continue to navigate uncharted territories, we invite you to be a part of this incredible journey. If your organization shares our values, consider collaborating with us. Let's redefine what's possible, foster innovation, and empower our youth for a brighter future.

Visit **[innovatorsforpurpose.org](https://innovatorsforpurpose.org)** to learn more about iFp's work.

# What Barriers Still Exist Today?

**The new home of the Harkin Institute elevates the future of design in inclusion, equity, & empathy.**

**by Former Senator Tom Harkin, Jason Kruse & Kevin Nordmeyer**

The following are excerpts from *ALL: The Making of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center + A Guidebook of Strategies for Inclusive Design (ALL)* created by BNIM, The Harkin Institute, and MillerKnoll to share the design process and strategies of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center at Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. *ALL* is distributed online as a resource for inclusive design, available at [bnim.com/library/all](https://bnim.com/library/all).

## **Envision: An Accessible, Inclusive Future of the Workplace**

**by Former Senator Tom Harkin**

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) brought about a radical transformation by which disability was approached in the United

States. It has helped to improve the lives of millions of Americans and began a global conversation on disability rights.

Despite the progress that we as a nation have made since the passage of the ADA, we still have a long way to go in breaking down barriers and changing attitudes on disability. Even in my retirement from public office, I am keenly aware of the need for progress in this area, and therefore wanted The Harkin Institute's new building to be at the forefront of this progress. I have often said that the ADA is built upon the four pillars of equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency, and I envisioned the new building to incorporate these four pillars.

During the design phase for the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center, I issued a challenge to our advisory team and architects to design a building that went beyond legal compliance and instead brought about innovation in what it means to be an accessible, inclusive workplace. Thanks to our brilliant lead architect Kevin Nordmeyer and associates of BNIM Architects, as well as the input from the members of our building advisory team, who represented a wide array of disability interest groups, The Harkin Institute's new building design symbolizes how universal design can guide the future of the workplace.

There are so many features that I am proud of in this building.

The central feature of The Harkin Center is the ramp wrapping around the lobby, serving as the primary means of going between the first and second floors. It serves as a symbol of equality: that regardless of

who you are, you should have the same opportunities to achieve your goals without barriers. That is what the ADA catalyzed and what we continue to reach for each day.

Since retiring from the United States Senate, I have worked with the Institute and other organizations to bridge the gap between people with disabilities and meaningful employment opportunities. Part of that goal is to design workplaces that meet the accessibility needs of the people who work there. I believe The Harkin Center can serve as a model for employers of how to incorporate design features that benefit not only people with disabilities but the entire workforce. This will lead to a more integrated, equal, and productive working environment that ultimately benefits everyone.

The countless stories that I heard in my career of people with disabilities who faced challenges navigating their daily lives are etched into the walls of this new building through its design features. My hope is that when future generations of architects, designers, and engineers walk through this building for inspiration, they not only see ramps and lights; they see those people and their stories.

## **Process: The Making of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center**

by Kevin Nordmeyer

The Harkin Institute for Public Policy and Citizen Engagement seeks to improve the lives of all Americans by giving policymakers access to high-quality information and engaging citizens as active participants

in the formation of public policy. Their work promotes research and understanding of the issues to which former Senator Tom Harkin devoted his career, including his historic legislation, the ADA, which was signed into law over 30 years ago.

For the architectural design profession, the ADA significantly shaped the design for buildings and landscapes through the creation of design standards for accessibility. These standards have been required for three decades, and they continue to provide the foundation for which we must evolve and expand our approach to inclusive design in the built environment.

The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center, the new home of The Harkin Institute on Drake University campus, embodies the Institute's mission and elevates standards for inclusive design. As a new dedicated office, research space, and center for community engagement, this facility seeks to engage the community in a dialogue of equity and empathy. Inclusive strategies are woven into the architecture itself, supporting all building users' experiences without feeling like accommodations are after-thoughts or contrived accessible obligations. Inherent to the building is a powerful spirit of place, creating an inclusive environment where *all* can thrive.

In the design process for the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center, our design team at BNIM worked closely with The Harkin Institute, Drake University, Senator Harkin, and their Core Disability Advisory Committee to understand needs that were not being met in the built environment. We posed a key question which guided the direction of the design process—"What barriers still exist today?" The

immediate response was “No one ever asks that question.” The committee taught us there is still the need for dialogue, and the 1970s statement is still relevant, “nothing about us without us!”

The dialogue in the programming discussions, design meetings, and research provided deeper insight into how design must continue to elevate the discussion beyond the ADA as a baseline to address ongoing barriers still faced by individuals every day.

I have Multiple Sclerosis (MS), and this progressive disease has enabled me to uniquely consider this approach to design as an architect slowly moving from no mobility concerns to the use of a wheelchair. From a limp at times, to a cane, to the reliance on a motorized wheelchair, I have encountered mobility and accessibility challenges almost every day within my physical environment. These experiences, in addition to learning from Senator Harkin and The Harkin Institute, have allowed me to consider the creation of space as a gracious act for all abilities.

The research and design process of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center laid the foundation for BNIM, The Harkin Institute, and our collaborator MillerKnoll to create a new publication, *ALL: The Making of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center + A Guidebook of Strategies for Inclusive Design*. This publication moves our design profession toward creating a unified approach to inclusive design and a more holistic view of what it means to design sustainably by recognizing the broad spectrum of human need rooted in inclusion, empathy, and equity.

# Design for ALL: Strategies for Inclusive Design

by Jason Kruse

Inclusive design is rooted in a process that creates environments that are gracious, generous, and considerate of all abilities. It should be integrated into the very beginning of the design of buildings because many of the strategies require certain space planning considerations that become difficult to achieve the further a design develops.

BNIM, The Harkin Institute, and MillerKnoll created *ALL: The Making of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center + A Guidebook of Strategies for Inclusive Design (ALL)* to share the design process and strategies of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center. *ALL* was published as a first edition in January 2023, presenting the lessons learned and research behind this project. Formatted as a case study and guidebook for design practitioners, *ALL* provides implementable strategies to address a broad spectrum of ability and human need through design.

The Tom and Ruth Harkin Center's inclusive design strategies are categorized into four guiding principles to be thoughtfully considered during the process of designing a new building. Understanding and considering these key strategies as soon as a project begins leads to design outcomes that are more gracious, considerate, and thoughtful for people of all abilities to work, learn, and belong.

## **Guiding Principles:**

**Generous Space** creates an environment where accommodations do not need to be asked for – what is needed is available. Strategies focus on path width; maneuverability; places of rest; orientation and navigation; and spatial access.

**Equitable Experiences** address human function and experiences in the most inclusive way possible, meaning no one is excluded from an experience due to their ability, gender, identity, etc. Strategies focus on equitable conference room configurations; primary circulation; restroom access; and elevator access.

**Clear Path** allows for an environment that is intuitive to the user for both regular and part-time users and visitors of a space. Strategies focus on multiple methods of signage and information communication; reduction of sensory noise; an accessible and visible entry sequence; minimizing glare and creating balance in building lighting; curved site lines; and visual clarity.

**Individual Empowerment** means there are no limitations in one's ability to use a space throughout the day. Strategies focus on accessible technology; establishing clear path choice; wellness rooms to support nursing mothers, virtual health appointments, migraine relief, stress management; and exceeding ADA minimum elevator accommodations.



*ALL* was designed with the empathetic spirit of the Tom and Ruth Harkin Center in mind and uses inclusive graphic design strategies throughout, ensuring elements such as text size, color, and literacy are accessible. The making of this publication was an opportunity to be mindful and inclusive of the diverse needs, abilities, and backgrounds of every individual. *ALL* is distributed online as a resource for inclusive design, available at **[bnim.com/library/all](http://bnim.com/library/all)**.

# The Challenges of Applying Inclusive Design in Healthcare

by Nedret Sahin, Kelsey Werner & Amy Wicks

The presence of inequity in healthcare is not new. Neither is the impact of race on how medicine is practiced and experienced by millions of people every day. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized and accelerated existing issues. It notably highlighted the systemic problems in both our culture at large and, more specifically, the medical establishment that negatively impacted historically excluded and underserved populations.

Systems of oppression are at work in the medical field, just as they are in many others, and it is incumbent upon us as designers to apply an intentional, critical lens. While the systemic bias inherent in many standard practices may not have been intentional, the harm inflicted by them is very real. As designers, we can do nothing and continue to perpetuate harm, or we can interrupt it by acknowledging that everything is designed (even healthcare!), and therefore, can be redesigned.

One way of doing this is through inclusive design. We see inclusive design as an approach to our work that considers the full range of human identities. It respects the great diversity in factors like ability, gender, age, race and culture, sexuality, and socio-economic situations.

Doing this successfully means considering the broader context of design at multiple levels. A person's experience of healthcare is shaped by multiple interacting entities, including an organization's structure and the experiences of its employees, as well as the mindsets and behaviors of individual employees.

## **Designing in Healthcare Means Confronting Complex Challenges**

One challenge of designing within the healthcare space is the complexity of the system. In navigating their health journeys, most patients must juggle and jump between multiple – often competing or conflicting – entities. This might include primary care providers, specialists, health insurance companies, and pharmacy benefit managers that are rarely part of one cohesive system. Further, each of these entities may interact with the others in different ways. The result is a complex ecosystem that is both difficult to navigate and even more difficult to create change from within.

Despite these challenges, we argue that doing the work of designing a better, more inclusive healthcare experience is vitally important to the health of our communities. There are few things more costly than intentionally or unintentionally excluding people from participating in their own health and safety. What's at stake is more than just our well-being – it's lives we're talking about.

As strategic designers, we partner with health and life sciences organizations, using inclusive design to create change from within. While we always strive to help our clients meet their business goals, our ultimate aim is to improve the interactions people have every day as they navigate their own health journeys and challenges via these organizations.

This is not a how-to article. Instead, this is an honest discussion of the challenges associated with putting inclusive design into practice in the healthcare space. We will reflect on three examples from our past work.

### **Improving recruiting practices to make clinical trial participants more diverse**

A large pharmaceutical company came to us looking for help improving their clinical trial recruiting practices to ensure more diverse participant cohorts. In digging into this issue and our client's existing efforts, we quickly realized how the complexities of the healthcare system itself impact trial recruiting and enrollment.

At this company, and others like it, many clinical trials rely on large academic medical centers (AMCs), mostly in big urban areas as study sites. While AMCs are well practiced at carrying out studies, many tend to serve a particular patient base – often white patients and often from higher socio-economic classes.

In many cases, recruiting a more diverse patient base means breaking this standard and looking for other partner organizations that serve more diverse patient sets. While this approach supports

access to diverse patients, it creates additional work to ensure clinical trial success, including coaching and providing training to ensure that organizations and providers are comfortable with clinical trial requirements.

During research for this project, we found that many patients of color were keenly aware of historic events like the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which left them somewhat reluctant to enroll in a study. While that study eventually led to many patient protections (such as informed consent and medical review boards), the historic context of the harms of medical research continues to cast a heavy shadow.

In building more inclusive healthcare experiences, we must acknowledge the complexities of the space, including modern-day systems that place much of the burden on the patient, as well as historical wrongs that continue to hold space in many communities. Only when we do this can we start to truly build something to better serve all patients.

## **Understanding nursing experience to reduce burnout & turnover**

The healthcare system is experiencing massive disruption, with frontline caregivers leaving the workforce at an unprecedented rate. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the strain and accelerated existing trends of burnout and turnover, particularly among nurses. Taking an inclusive design approach means going beyond the patient experience to consider frontline provider experience as well so we can understand how healthcare creates systemic barriers to equitable care.

In another project, we sought to understand pivotal moments in nurses' careers that impacted their wellbeing and retention. We engaged nurses directly through participatory workshops to share their unique experiences, including their emotions and key moments when they decided to make a career change. We found that over the course of their careers, nurses' emotional experiences accumulate and their negative experiences reach tipping points, which spark the need to switch roles or leave the field entirely.

One key insight was that nurses feel marginalized within the healthcare system. Nurses see many barriers to equitable care. Because of their lived experience, they have innovative ideas about how to solve issues, but often lack the autonomy to act within their roles or feel their voices are not heard.

Nurses are constantly on the go by nature of their work, seeing one patient after another to maximize their time without pause. This can cause compassion fatigue and physical exhaustion. But burnout goes beyond physical exhaustion. Our research showed that nurses experience a build up of factors that might seem minor in isolation – fragmentation of care, wearing multiple hats due to short staffing, breaking protocol to address pressing patient needs – the list goes on. Many nurses we spoke to described striving to create change from within but experienced constant friction due to systemic barriers to health equity.

The onus of burnout must be placed on the system, not the individual. However, we are often tasked with addressing the symptoms of a problem, not its root cause. As designers, we must understand and

empower the voices of frontline providers with lived experience in the healthcare ecosystem because they are just as relevant as healthcare leadership. We need to understand how employee experience shapes the patient experience to promote equity in both. And we must strive to address the organizational and systemic causes, not just the symptoms.

## **Enhancing dignity & belonging for employees of color in a health insurance organization**

Racism, oppression, and inequity is ingrained in our society. And as a result, it is ingrained in our workplaces. Unconscious bias in individuals leads to unfair policies, practices, and cultures in organizations.

In another project, we collaborated with a health insurance company to design equitable experiences to enhance inclusion for employees of color. We engaged employees to imagine radical new ways of working with teams and serving individuals rooted in dignity and belonging. Through this work, we uncovered structural, institutional, interpersonal, and internalized drivers and impacts of racism.

An understanding of the reach and impact of racism was used to develop key initiatives to redesign employee experience. A key insight was the need to create change both from the top down and the bottom up. Change needs to be modeled from the top, but also disseminated and supported at all levels of the organization. Otherwise, it risks becoming performative.

## **Racism is experienced across an ecosystem**

- 1. Internalized.** A set of privately held beliefs, prejudices & ideas about the superiority of white people & the inferiority of people of color.
- 2. Interpersonal.** The expression of racism between individuals when individuals interact & their private beliefs affect those interactions.
- 3. Institutional.** Discriminatory treatment, unfair policies & practices, & inequitable outcomes for people of color & advantages for white people.
- 4. Structural.** A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, & norms perpetuate racial groups inequality.



The challenge ultimately is changing mindsets. We started by identifying initiatives that model values of dignity and belonging at senior levels. This included creating resources to train leaders, hosting ongoing forums for open conversations, and developing an educational series to foster empathy.

The connective thread here was recognizing the importance of creating a foundation for learning and growth at the individual level. As designers and strategists, we must facilitate mindset shifts – both among those we design for and with and for ourselves.

### **Inclusive Design for healthcare must be multidimensional**

Inclusive design occurs at many levels – from the healthcare ecosystem, to caregiver experience, to individual mindsets. Working within such a large, complex system has its challenges, but we are confident that the payoff of this important work is worth it.

In doing this work, we must remember that inclusive design is not a checklist – it is evolving and ongoing work. While there may be missteps along the way, what is most important is that we, as designers and strategists, keep pursuing the goal of finding better, more equitable solutions for all audience members – one project at a time.

# Designing for Grief

By A.J. Johannes

This summer, my life was shattered by the passing of my mom and best friend. I entered into an unknown world that I had never experienced before, and it became apparent that the rest of the world was ill-equipped to accommodate grief.

Grief has a remarkable way of reshaping our existence, turning the world we once knew into something foreign and surreal. As an Inclusive Design strategist, my daily mission involves ensuring that the voices of historically marginalized individuals are deeply integrated into all processes of the companies we work with. This typically centers on disabilities, both temporary and long-term, as well as the needs of older adults and their intersectional identities. However, as I have started to navigate life without my mom, I found myself wondering: can we also apply the principles of inclusive design to help those of us grappling with grief?

What I've come to realize amid my own experience of loss is the temporary disability that grief imposes and the profound importance of designing for it.

Grief, much like disability, is often pushed aside in Western society's conversations especially. People feel uncomfortable and are often scared of both—despite the fact, that both are experiences that nearly all of us will inevitably face. I would like to explore the parallels between inclusive design and designing for grief, to shed a much-needed light on the hidden aspects of this common human experience and how we all can better support those who are grieving.

## **Understanding Inclusive Design**

Before we delve into the concept of designing for grief, it's essential to grasp the fundamentals of inclusive design. Inclusive design is an innovation approach that prioritizes creating products, environments, and experiences accessible to as many people as possible, for as long as possible. It identifies and dismantles barriers to ensure that a business's overall strategy incorporates the diverse needs and perspectives of individuals who are often marginalized and overlooked, to benefit everyone.

The beauty of inclusive design lies in its ubiquitous applications. Just as it aims to accommodate a broad range of disabilities and backgrounds, a similar principle can be applied to grief. Grief is a universal human experience, transcending age, gender, and culture. Like inclusive design, it demands thoughtful consideration of the diverse ways people navigate this challenging and debilitating journey.

Additionally, as Kat Holmes states in her book, *Mismatch: How Inclusion Shapes Design*: “For better or worse, the people who design the touchpoints of society determine who can participate and who's left out. Often unwittingly.”

## **The Temporary Disability of Grief**

While it's not a "traditional" disability, I have found that grief shares many similarities with physical, mental, or emotional impairment that go largely unnoticed. When we think of disabilities, we often picture physical disabilities or neurodiversity. However, grief is an invisible yet potent force that significantly impacts an individual's physical, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive well-being.

The grief journey is unique for each person, but it commonly involves feelings of sadness, numbness, anger, confusion, and deep sorrow. Grief can disrupt sleep patterns, appetite, and overall physical health. It can make it challenging to concentrate and engage with daily tasks. In essence, it temporarily disables our ability to function at our assumed normal for an unforeseeable amount of time.

## **Designing for Grief Through Applying Inclusive Design Thinking**

Inclusive design strives to create environments that are accessible to as many people as possible, and we can apply a similar mindset to designing for grief. While grief, like disability, is a universal experience, each person's journey is unique. Therefore, there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach to designing for grief. Instead, we should adopt a flexible and empathetic perspective. This approach calls for systemic changes that will ultimately benefit many people, including those who aren't currently experiencing grief.

Here are a few ways for us to start creating more inclusive environments for grievers.

## **Acknowledge and Normalize Grief**

In the past, I would pull away from conversations around death and grief, but now I realize that this response was a disservice to both myself and the person grieving. Designing for grief starts with acknowledging and normalizing the grieving process. This means recognizing that grief is a natural response that takes many forms and can last much longer than people seem to think. By openly discussing grief and acknowledging its presence in our lives, we create a culture where people feel more comfortable seeking support, expressing their emotions and can thrive in their own time. If we don't talk about it, the way we approach grief will not improve.

## **Promote Education and Awareness**

You never know what a person is going through. It's critical to have systems in place to ensure an empathetic approach to the way companies can interact with customers, and design can eliminate stress on both ends. Being able to design for grief must go beyond simply acknowledging its existence. We need to understand and embrace the challenges faced by grieving individuals. This can involve training programs, workshops, and public campaigns to reduce stigma and promote empathy and understanding.

For example, I was listening to the podcast *Good Mourning Grief* by Sally Douglas and Imogen Carn, where a guest speaker told the story about how she was purchasing a cake to celebrate her deceased baby girl's first birthday. When she went in to make the order, she was met with cold awkwardness that left her in tears and deterred her from

returning – and she warned others not to go either. So, not only is being more sensitive to grief the right thing to do, but it can greatly increase empathy for customer emotions and needs leading to more loyal customers.

## **Foster Inclusivity in the Workplace**

One third of your life is spent at work, so designing for grief must also extend to the workplace. Employers should adopt policies that recognize grief as a legitimate reason for leave (beyond the typical three days, a relatively quick period of time to come to terms with loss) and offer flexibility in work arrangements. Fostering an inclusive and empathetic work environment ensures that employees can navigate their grief without fear of judgment or repercussions. We also must create safe spaces for people to talk about their grief – similar to ERGs (Employee Resource Groups) – which are communities for employees with similar characteristics that can elevate career growth, mentorship, and support.

## **Beware of Holidays and Their Impact**

Holidays like Mother’s and Father’s Day, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Christmas, and others can be especially hard for those experiencing grief. The constant pressure to be happy and the images of happy families can bring up complex and painful emotions. So, we must think about how we can represent and design for grief during these difficult moments in time. Some practical applications could be showing a family honoring a departed loved one while celebrating in a campaign or shelving books and resources in the spaces that also have candies, cards, or gifts.

## **Becoming More Empathetic Designers**

Grief is a profound and inevitable part of the human experience. Yet, our culture often encourages us to hide from it, to shun those who are going through it, or to quickly move on. Inclusive design teaches us to embrace diversity and to cater to the needs of all individuals, regardless of their circumstances. Designing for grief is an extension of this principle, reminding us that we must be empathetic designers, creators, marketers, employers, and, most importantly, human beings.

Grief is a topic that deserves an open and honest conversation. It's okay to talk about grief and loss. In fact, it's essential. We never know when we or someone we care about will be faced with this temporary disability. The way we approach and support those who are grieving should be a fluid, adaptable, and empathetic process.

As a society, we must recognize that grief is not a solitary journey. It's a shared human experience, and by designing for it, we not only honor the memory of those we've lost but also create a more compassionate and understanding world for ourselves and future generations.

# Combat Inclusion- Washing

## as We Advocate for Inclusive Design

by Kamara Sudberry

When exploring the progress of inclusive design in the architecture and interior design (A&D) industry, it's impossible not to draw parallels with sustainability. Both sustainability and inclusive design are complex concepts that constantly evolve and require a holistic view of decision making – including but not limited to procurement, testing, production, and life cycle of design. However, as the industry becomes more aware and works to combat “greenwashing” –the act of marketing and presenting a perception of being environmentally friendly without taking genuine action to minimize negative environmental impacts—A&D professionals can be proactive and apply this lens to inclusive design. As we embrace designing for belonging and inclusion, balance optimism with a healthy dose of skepticism –ensuring inclusive design doesn't become diluted (or “inclusion washed”).

While most leaders and designers aspire to create inclusive environments, there is no shared understanding of what that entails



or how to begin. This reality requires professionals to examine each assumption and choice made throughout the design process and to come together to set a higher standard. This is challenging work, and there isn't a rule book or checklist. Inclusive design is not a label, it requires authentic action, and solutions will only emerge when knowledge experts are present and consulted on key decisions.

As the design industry becomes more adept at identifying “greenwashing,” here are a few strategies for combating “inclusion-washing.”

## **Examine Exclusion, to Celebrate Inclusion**

One of the first ways to ensure inclusive design is authentically implemented is to center the experiences of people who have been excluded, underrepresented, and marginalized in decision making – by fostering new partnerships and reimagining expectations. At Steelcase, we are embracing the practice of inclusive design or the design philosophy that uses participatory methods to create new ways for traditionally-excluded users to engage in activities of their choice. For example, collaborating with organizations like Special Olympics Michigan and SPORK! has helped our teams better understand the barriers of neurodivergent community members. Through trial and error, new insights emerged, for example providing several small break areas or sensory spaces throughout the entire ecosystem of an environment – instead of assigning sensory-respite to a single room. A single setting cannot solve the diverse needs of neurodivergent people, and this strategy honors that nuance. It also aligns with the truth that many groups of people benefit from neuro-

inclusion adjustments in the environment, especially anyone that may not know if they are neurodivergent or people who face barriers to receive an official diagnosis.

## **Use Detailed, Disaggregated Data to Ensure Human-Centered Approaches**

Another factor in inclusive design is ensuring solutions are informed by detailed, disaggregated data which allows traditionally-excluded groups to be heard in the process. Human-centered design is an effective approach that utilizes user feedback to solve problems. However, this approach has often neglected to analyze data from traditionally-excluded community groups. This can lead to solutions based on assumptions rather than genuine feedback from those facing the greatest challenges. When Steelcase collaborated with G3ict to develop the “Blueprint for Inclusive Workplaces of the Future,” this work validated the importance of listening to people with disabilities. Through disaggregating the data and analyzing the responses of individuals with disabilities, it became clear that creating accessible products, technology, systems, and physical spaces should be the priority (when compared to responses of non-disabled individuals). People with disabilities identified the need for accommodating spaces and tools in the workplace, and that representation is likely to improve when those are provided.

## **Promote Cultural Competency Within Wellbeing**

Another way to ensure genuine inclusive design, is to integrate appreciation for cultural differences throughout the design process. Steelcase recently conducted global research among employees and

leaders in 11 countries, and both groups identified wellbeing as the most important issue in the upcoming year. As organizations prioritize wellbeing, it is critical to also consider cultural competency when developing solutions. Unfortunately, this aspect is often overlooked, which can hinder the success of such initiatives. The healthcare industry has made significant progress in this area by investing in cultural competency training and recognizing race-based disparities throughout trauma-informed design. The latter involves designing products, services, and environments that consider the potential impact of trauma on individuals and aim to create safe, healing, and recovery-promoting spaces. Also, the International WELL Building Institute's Equity Rating is a commendable initiative that promotes evidence-based strategies for creating healthy environments that are inclusive of people from all backgrounds and physical abilities. Leaning into these approaches can help reinforce health equity by design.

As inclusive design continues to impact the A&D industry, join advocates in being both excited and skeptical. Resist the urge for easy solutions and eye-catching labels by embracing learning and development on DEIA (or diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility) on the sources of exclusion, while also promoting culturally-appropriate approaches to trauma-informed design. When A&D professionals look beyond codes and compliance and explore the role identity and bias play in decision making— we realize there is no one space or one product, that can “solve” exclusion. We learn that we are all responsible for combating inclusion-washing and seeking a higher standard—together.

# The Case for Inclusive Classroom Acoustics

by Nicole Cuff

Do you ever find yourself in a crowded restaurant, leaning over your table, struggling to understand your dining companion? I know I do! Amid the chaos of the restaurant (noise from the kitchen combined with the sound build-up from conversations and music), speech intelligibility is virtually null, and when the discussion is new and unfamiliar, you will likely miss every bit of it.

The same is true for learning environments, where every class starts with new information, which is expected to be fully decoded by the students. What to do if the classroom is so noisy or reverberant that it interferes with speech intelligibility, making students either struggle to understand the topic or lose interest altogether? Earlier this year, a group of acousticians and architects (myself included) got together and discussed our journey through the school design experience, focusing on the acoustical outcome of the learning environment and the importance of acoustics on the development of the young learner.

Research shows that improved classroom acoustics have a significant positive impact on learning for all students, not just students with hearing or learning impairments<sup>1</sup>. Undeniably so, the most engaged sense of a young student throughout a school day is listening, which informs their basic concepts on how to speak, read, communicate, and assimilate new information.

A different way of thinking about good listening conditions in a classroom is to express it as high speech intelligibility. One should be able to hear and understand words clearly, without any strenuous effort. In general, for speech to be intelligible, it needs to arrive to the listener with sufficient loudness and not be masked by other sounds, whether these are background noises (from mechanical equipment or exterior activity) or poorly timed reflections off the room surfaces, meaning delayed copies of the sound itself.

Another goal is to have a relatively uniform distribution from sound throughout the classroom so all listeners have a satisfying and similar experience. This should account for typical speaking directions from teachers/presenters, and for the directivity of the human voice. Consequently, the architecture of a room, including size, shaping and finishes, greatly influences speech intelligibility.

A well-designed classroom environment is important not only for students, but for teachers, too. Sarah Oakes, a designer at Perkins Eastman Architects, advocates for good work conditions for teachers

1. Delivering Accessible Acoustics to Create Better Learning Environments,” AIA Conference on Architecture, A. Carbarlleira, C. Johnson, F. Iglehardt, K. Riley, K. Meyer, and S. Wilson, San Francisco, CA, June 9, 2023.

when she says, “Well-designed classrooms can be very impactful on teachers’ vocal health, and help to prevent voice strain if a classroom is designed in such a way that the space doesn’t require the teacher to speak in a raised voice at all times.”

School representatives are also concerned about noise levels in their classrooms. Carol Harris, a Senior Associate at Jonathan Levi Architects, says, “When we are hired to design a new school, teachers and administrators will ask, ‘Is this going to be a noisy area?’ They’re particularly concerned about the students with sensory processing differences who need a nice, safe, quiet environment.” In reality, all students need a nice, safe, and quiet environment to succeed in their studies. Providing good conditions for educational spaces helps the entire student population, not just children with hearing loss, and is a great incentive to plan for an all-inclusive acoustical design.

That said, how do we achieve high speech intelligibility and have good listening conditions in the classrooms and schools in our communities? Several architecture-related standards are used as prerequisites for funding public-school projects (such as LEED, CHPS, ICC A117.1, and ANSI 12.60<sup>2</sup>), and they include thoughtful acoustical requirements – namely, controlling sound build-up and reverberation, mechanical system noise control in classrooms, and sound isolation between adjacent occupied spaces. If you see that your school was built according to one of these standards, you should expect the school to have at least a basic level of acoustic robustness.

2. LEED for Schools (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design), CHPS (Collaborative for High Performance Schools), ANSI S12.60 Standard for Classroom Acoustics and ICC A117.1 Enhanced Acoustics for Classrooms.

Good listening conditions require control of reverberation and sound build-up. Rooms with hard finishes (windows, glass partitions, wood flooring, and drywall ceilings) experience sound build-up due to the multitude of sound reflections off these surfaces, which layer on each other and compete with the direct sound, making it unintelligible. By comparison, spaces designed with good listening conditions include sound-absorbing finishes that reduce the energy of sound reflections and minimize the overall sound build-up.

Designers can use sound-absorptive wall and ceiling panels as a strategy to absorb sound. When they do so, they need to consider several factors such as how sound absorptive the panel is, what the panel looks like (i.e. will it work with the overall room aesthetics), the cost, and how much of it to use before the sound is over absorbed, diluting energy to the cost of intelligibility. As David Harris<sup>3</sup>, Associate at Lavallee Brensinger Architects, explains, “We have to balance all pertinent criteria and choose the appropriate interior design product, which meets all the goals of acoustics, aesthetics and budget.”

To that end, Carol Harris says, “We see designing for better sound as something fun, it’s a challenge. We’re happy to use inexpensive sound treatments in our designs, that’s what we’re here for! We work on patterning or shaping using just simple acoustic panels. It’s all about how you place it. You do it in a thoughtful way, and it turns out really cool. It doesn’t have to be the most expensive thing to be the most interesting thing.” David Harris adds, “Especially in a school environment, you really want to have that ‘joie de vivre,’ sort of fun element in there.”

3. No relation to Carol Harris, contributor to this article.

Specifying suitably quiet mechanical systems is another critical piece of acoustical design since the noise from those systems also competes with speech intelligibility. In most cases, the challenge of quieting down the background noise levels from the mechanical equipment is a balancing act that takes place during the later phases of the design (typically Design Development and Construction Documents) when the acoustical consultant works closely with the mechanical engineer and the architect to incorporate sound attenuation measures in the ducts paths between equipment and the occupied spaces, as well as vibration isolation control to prevent the fans from introducing structure-borne vibration into the building.

[Three illustrations demonstrate how acoustical treatments can improve sound in a classroom setting. All three images feature a teacher addressing six students in a classroom. The first illustration shows the teacher addressing the students; red arrows represent the sound of the teacher's voice. The sound bounces around the room, from the teacher's mouth to a desk, the walls, and the ceiling. The illustration is labeled "Not as Good". It explains that speech is less clear in this classroom because there are only reflective surfaces, making it harder for students to understand the teacher. The following image is labeled "Better" and includes a sound absorptive ceiling. The red arrows in this illustration are fewer, demonstrating how sound reaching the ceiling is absorbed, making speech clearer. The final image is labeled "Best." It features ceiling and wall absorption in the classroom, creating even more sound absorption, resulting in the best speech condition of the three options.]



Heather Jauregui, Director of Sustainability and an Associate Principal at Perkins Eastman, says, “Acoustics are notoriously the environmental factor that people are LEAST satisfied with, and in my opinion should have the greatest focus moving forward to a) update standards and b) ensure we create equitable learning environments for all learners.”

David Harris shares, “There seems to be just no end to distractions, right? Everywhere you look, everywhere you listen, there’s something going on. So, it’s important to have those appropriate spaces where kids are learning. It’s absolutely a critical part of our overall educational vision, how we deliver their program, and how we deliver spaces to support it. It’s part of our job. We love doing it and work with the entire design team collaboratively across many disciplines to make it happen. A classroom can be beautiful, but if it doesn’t perform acoustically, it’s not successful.”

Carol Harris adds, “In the new building that I’m working on right now, the school is asking for a quiet cafeteria space. So, they’re factoring in rooms that they know would be noisy for some, and they know that other people need quieter spaces. And so now it’s becoming part of the program.”

How can we as parents and community members advocate for kids, to ensure schools have good listening conditions for all students in their classrooms? When opportunities arise for facility upgrades or new school buildings, we can communicate with our local school committees.

According to Carol Harris, “The school committee will have an opinion on programs. In the case of the building that we’re designing now, the community dictated the standards. And they have guidelines written into their bylaws, so it is something we, as the designers, are mandated to adhere to. And in fact, the town didn’t have the money for a quiet mechanical system in the beginning, but as the school wanted it badly enough we ended up putting it in.”

Good listening conditions in classrooms are now a major part of inclusive design, and should be a part of every living school building. Educating ourselves, our communities, and stakeholders on the importance of acoustics in learning spaces is just the first step.

[The remaining images show the following examples: Boston Arts Academy (BAA) main entrance gathering stair features linear metal ceiling baffles and a high NRC acoustic ceiling above to help control reverberation. Architect: Perkins Eastman. ; Music room with acoustic wall and ceiling treatments at Martin Luther King, Jr. School, Cambridge, MA. Architect: Perkins Eastman. ; Auditorium space with angled CMU walls and floating plywood panels as acoustic deflectors demonstrates how the design uses simple materials and the structure of the building to achieve acoustic performance at Fuller Middle School, Framingham, MA. Architect: Jonathan Levi Architects. All images: Robert Benson Photography.]

# Inclusive Design & Empathy

## Roundtable Discussion

**Moderator: Emma Stone**

**in conversation with: Josephine Holmboe & Anne Petersen**

### **Emma Stone:**

Why should designers, leaders, and policy makers care about accessible design? What value does it serve consumers, both those who do or do not identify as disabled?

### **Josephine Holmboe:**

As designers, I think we have a responsibility to have an understanding of who we're designing for. Designers should care, so that we can provide the best possible solution for all. I became a designer so that I could help people and I chose to work on projects that were actually helping people in some form or function. I think we should care because it makes everything better. We should care at a base level as fellow humans whether someone is frustrated because they aren't recognized or if they avoid doing activities because there are too many barriers in their way. I think the seed of where we can all start caring more is just straightforward empathy, making sure that whatever we're doing, we've considered not what we're making, but who we're making it for.

**ES:**

Anne, I'm curious to get your thoughts on the importance of awareness and education in terms of inclusive design. How do we raise awareness for inclusive design practices and how do we convince leaders to think and design in this way?

**Anne Petersen:**

I want to step back a second just to say that we are not just designing for humans, but we are also designing for the future. In that, we need to think about humanity in the future and that includes thinking about climate and thinking about our impact on it.

In terms of convincing leaders, I have found that the education piece is an important one. I've heard this over and over and I've found it to be true— that leaders, policymakers, developers, and those in charge of programs, all of them tend to respond well to experiencing people who are having trouble with the current state of things. Videos are powerful even if it's just someone's voice, quotes, or a transcript. The closer they can experience the challenge, the more effective it is and the more it will, hopefully, provoke a sense of empathy if they hadn't had one to that point. Hearing or seeing other's frustration is really impactful and makes a person realize how difficult it can be for people. Additionally, once you see how difficult it is for people in that moment, you also realize that the frustration builds over time with each barrier that an individual has to face throughout their day.

**JH:**

Having this conversation is really important to help designers understand that it does start with them. Their responsibility is to

provide products, experiences, services, and to be more curious about how to help people and to understand what they can do or can't do.

There are many more activists among the vast amount of designers that are probably going to read this: wherever they can help, wherever they can push for legislation, wherever they can affect decisions is great. But I think bar those actions, they can always start by just being more curious, not just about who they're designing for, but also what do they need to understand that might get in the way of ensuring a fully inclusive approach to anything. I think that's kind of broad, but it starts at the bottom. It starts with us. That's one thing we can immediately affect. Then how we push it up the chain so that we can ensure laws are written and standards are made following those actions.

### **ES:**

Your statement resonates with this idea that design is a form of activism, if you want it to be. In this context, I think it certainly should be, whether it be because you're a disabled designer yourself or you are thinking of yourself as an ally. It's the idea of decentering oneself and amplifying the voices and the needs of those who need to be lifted.

One of the things I often hold hand in hand is the idea of challenges and I like to think of challenges as opportunities. In this space, what are some of the greatest challenges? What are the limitations when it comes to standardizing and relying too heavily on policy to make change? Because again, a mandate, an incentive, a regulation can only go so far. What challenges have you seen and how did that translate into an opportunity?

**JH:**

Because I work on emerging technologies, I see challenges going into the future. We're talking about AI, we're talking about VR, we're talking about a whole slew of technologies. We really haven't had an opportunity to understand how to make those more inclusive. VR, virtual reality for one, you could put on a headset and experience something in the virtual reality space that regardless of what your physical capabilities might be, you can walk around. In some ways that helps people with disabilities experience something they might not in real life, but at the same time, people who are vision impaired can't access that experience. VR is not inclusive. I think that's going to be the challenge of how to interpret some of those technologies for a wide variety of individuals.

**AP:**

Yeah, there's a federal agency that's doing testing on facial recognition, which they use for one of their products and that they have already noted that has difficulty recognizing people of various races. And so they're testing to find out at what point does the technology advance so much that we can implement this. But I have to also point out that that can also provide challenges for a wide variety of other folks. For example, some folks who have had a stroke have facial changes where part of their face does not look the way it used to, so it might not match their license and isn't recognizable for the facial recognition technology. There are many, many examples in which the technologies that we're implementing that are fairly new might not work for everyone.

I would also add that standards are the minimum. The way I've worked with this in the past is introducing things like a maturity model

and providing toolkits so that teams can see how they can start with the minimum, but continue to grow in doing the right thing by adopting the mindset, not just the policy, not just the standard and thus doing better by the people who need the service and increasingly so over time.

**JH:**

When I started, there were still a lot of designers trying to make cool products. What I'm seeing now coming out of schools are more approaches around real world problems. They're not just trying to design widgets and apps and gamify everything. They're really starting to think about real world problems, which makes me so very hopeful. I think as senior designers who are interacting with these young designers, it's really important to understand that this is the future and helping guide them and shape them through this process is essential. They have so much that we didn't have when we were going through design school because of conversations like this, because of policies that have been made, because of an awareness level that exists now that didn't exist when I went to design school. I think we need to learn from them as much as they're learning from us and encourage young designers to lean into problems that are really valuable to all people. I would say to young designers coming out of school, just keep being curious. Being curious about everything is going to make you a much better designer and it's going to help all your designs get out into the world in a good way.

**AP:**

I've learned that we need to design for those who need it most, not necessarily those who will be using it most. The folks who will be using

it most, you usually have covered, but if you can cover those who need it most everyone else will benefit. Just the bottom line, I would say fancier and flashier is not always better for usability or accessibility or equity or inclusivity.

One thing that we can do to move the needle is implement things like equity pauses. Equity pauses are a practice. You can find the questions for them online. It's a practice introduced by EquityXDesign. But these questions help you disrupt your usual way of thinking and resist the sense of urgency that's typical of business culture, tech culture, and white supremacy.

For more of this discussion visit:

**[designmuseumfoundation.org/inclusive-design-empathy](https://designmuseumfoundation.org/inclusive-design-empathy)**



# Inclusive Design & the Pursuit of Intimacy

## Finding Connection in the Modern World

by Aidan Borer & Risham Nadeem

### **Intimacy – what is it and why is love so hard to find?**

As customer researchers, we often talk about universal human needs. Intimacy—romantic intimacy—in particular, is one enduring human need that we are programmed to fulfill. We're hardwired to seek companionship, and the way we pursue it is a microcosm for all interpersonal relationships.

But just because it's enduring doesn't mean it's unchanging.

With people staying single longer, hook-up culture, a growing subculture around non-monogamy entering the mainstream, and the rise of mobile technologies in facilitating connection, it's clear the way we engage with intimacy is evolving.

Intimacy is also incredibly personal. In the interviews that informed this work, we heard a wide range of definitions. To some, intimacy is a connection made for a night, a week, or a month. To others, the search for intimacy is for life-long companionship. For some, intimacy = sex. For others, it's the emotional connection that makes it worthwhile.

The pursuit of intimacy under capitalism has led to the creation of multibillion-dollar industries; romance publishing, romcom television and film production, the wedding industrial complex, matchmaking and dating services, sexual wellness, and more. Historically, these are industries that have prioritized the needs of white, cisgender, straight, middle class, suburban, and vanilla users. The needs, desires, and purchasing power of people who fall outside of this “norm” have been ignored.

In 2023, we conducted ten interviews with a wider range of users. Men and women of color, queer and non-binary people, religious and bi-cultural folks; people whose lived experience doesn't neatly fit into this paradigm.

Our initial hypothesis was that marginalized peoples' experiences in the pursuit of intimacy—specifically engaging with dating apps—comes with more complex challenges, and we assumed those challenges would be the focus of our writing. However, through our conversations, this focus shifted. Instead, we're going to use this space to celebrate “non-normative” dating practices—learnings from kinky, queer, Black and Brown, disabled, and bi-cultural daters. In doing so, we hope to shine a light on some of the ways they're finding love (or lust) on their own terms.

It's an uncomfortable truth that the design industry does not reflect the populations who experience the world we shape every day. While we must work to diversify our field, shaping a better future can't wait. As such, it's even more critical to realize when we are not designing for ourselves, and to find ways to empathize with all of our users. Empathy is one of the most powerful tools in a designer's arsenal because it enables us to see the world through the eyes of those with a different lived experience than us. We want you—regardless of your own identity—to empathize with the folks whose stories we have collected and reflect on what mainstream dating might be like if we borrowed from their practices.

### **Celebrating the weird and wonderful; begging, borrowing and stealing from the fringes.**

Through these conversations, we took away several “hacks” that marginalized people are applying to make dating a more joyful experience. We encourage you to reflect on what you could learn from them.

Some striking learnings came from practitioners of kink. One interviewee, Pascale, talked about getting into kink after divorce in their forties. They pointed out that even the most casual of kinky hookups require a level of respect, enthusiastically expressed consent, and open communication. When you have all three, those interactions are more comfortable because everyone knows what to expect and how to stop or de-escalate play if they choose to. What might Tinder look like if casual trysts were negotiated the way they are in kinky spaces? Imagine how much better sex we'd have if we could leave shame at the door?

“Community” can mean everything and nothing, but to queer people, community means the blurring of platonic and erotic, where there’s a freedom to define the interaction in a number of ways —as long as everyone’s having a good time. You might meet someone on Grindr, fuck, and then become friends. Or you might date as a networking opportunity. Mina, a 35-year-old bisexual woman, said “My straight single friends were envious of the fun I had. If it wasn’t a romantic match, there was a sense of friendship or camaraderie.” This is in complete opposition to the old joke that men and women can’t be friends because sexual attraction gets in the way. Clearly, queer people are navigating those attractions in much more nuanced ways.

Let’s consider more traditional practices. We spoke to bi-cultural and religious people, who talked about their learnings on communication. Leaving societal expectations at the door, they’re happier being direct about what they’re looking for. Alice doesn’t want to have sex outside of marriage, so while she might not disclose that on her profile, she does address it early on. She and Caitlin—a 30-year-old East Asian woman, who is straight and Christian—both agreed that religious compatibility was important to them, and communicated so early. Laila, engaged to a man her parents introduced her to via a modern arranged marriage, recognizes that “it might sound crazy” to get families involved within a couple of months, with a view to move towards marriage, but “I didn’t want to ‘chill’ for a couple of years. I wanted to do things in line with my beliefs and boundaries.” What might dating look like if we could signal our intentions without fear of judgment? How much easier might it be if we could involve trusted friends and family in our search for a partner?

Finally, we spoke to two romance novelists, Nisha Sharma and Hannah Bonam-Young, who told us that romance has always been a genre that champions marginalized voices. First, a space for stories about women, written by women, it's now becoming one of the most diverse genres, reflecting its audience. Hannah, a disabled author whose book *Out On A Limb* features two disabled main characters, said, "I would have killed to have this book when I was 20 years old and trying to figure out love and sex and intimacy, and I think the more people are able to write from their own perspective, it opens up empathy from others into their experience and helps elevate everyone." She goes on to say, "I'm not writing books for disabled people. I'm writing books for romance fans and hoping they pick up on experiences that I have had. My characters are disabled, but it's just one part of who they are." Hannah had low expectations for how the book would perform, but it's already outsold older titles, and it's getting rave reviews. There is much we can learn about empathy from romance publishing. What would "mainstream" dating experiences look like if they were designed empathy-first?

## **Rebranding the Revolution**

As designers, we pride ourselves on crafting experiences that are intuitive, engaging, and meaningful. Yet, in the realm of online dating—a space where human emotions, aspirations, and vulnerabilities intertwine—we find ourselves at a crossroads. Does our design genuinely encompass the diverse spectrum of humanity, or have we inadvertently perpetuated the societal biases we sought to overcome due to the inherent profit motives of these platforms? And where does responsibility lie to make it better—on the brands who power these platforms, or the individuals who navigate them?

In the words of one interviewee, “The problem isn’t the platform. It’s men.” And yet, that perspective cannot absolve platforms and those who design them from an inherent responsibility to be good stewards of the experience they create. Pascale, a former architect, said, “If I designed a building that excluded people or created a space that is unsafe, I would bear legal responsibility for that. Why isn’t the same level of rigor applied to the designers of these kinds of virtual spaces?”

More so, it’s imperative to understand that the issues our interviewees surfaced— fetishization, erasure, racialized “preferences”—aren’t accidental oversights that can be ignored. They’re emblematic of deeper systemic biases that we, as designers, may unconsciously perpetuate. If our algorithms can predict potential matches based on intricate preferences, surely, we can rise to the challenge of fostering genuine inclusivity.

In an age where design is as much about ethics as aesthetics we must recognize and address the silent barriers - for instance, filters. They seem innocuous, perhaps even empowering. Want a partner of a specific height, body type, or ethnicity? Filter away! But what begins as personal preference soon morphs into societal prejudice. A ‘preference’ against dating certain ethnicities, for example, is racial bias repackaged. Should our designs, then, facilitate this?

To create a digital dating landscape devoid of harmful filters that accentuate body shaming or racial biases, we need to reassess the algorithms. The code that predicts potential matches can be

recalibrated to challenge, rather than reaffirm, entrenched biases. What if the algorithm occasionally nudged a user towards a profile outside their expressed ‘preferences’, gently broadening their horizons?

It’s well known that designing for “extreme” users has resulted in some of the most successful designs—look no further than the OXO GoodGrip, designed for users with severe arthritis. Similarly, if we were to design around the safety of transgender women of color, the most frequent targets of violence, all of us would be safer.

## **A confluence of responsibility and a call to action**

Design isn’t neutral. It’s a powerful mediator of values, ethics, and aesthetics. Designers must recognize that this power bears responsibility. We’ve already seen this in the unintended consequences and psychological impact of Tinder’s landmark swiping feature, which has now been incorporated into most popular dating apps. When we made an endless pool of headshots available to daters, we dehumanized real people—disproportionately, marginalized people. In the domain of dating apps, where emotions run deep, design failures aren’t mere inconveniences. They are affirmations of exclusion.

As designers, we are in a unique position to inspire and cultivate a mindset shift. As we craft products, we also sculpt behavior and perceptions. Let’s remember that at the heart of every interaction lies a human being, seeking connection and validation, and love.

With dating apps, we're not just shaping an interface. We're shaping human connections, perceptions, and, indeed, society's fabric. By weaving inclusivity and empathy into our work, we make a potent statement: Every individual, irrespective of their identity, deserves genuine connection, dignity, and love.



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