

Habinteg 2020 Prize

“In 50 years’ time the nature of impairments may change significantly, and the proportion of disabled people in the population is set to increase. Taking these factors into account and retaining the social model of disability as a central approach, how should the design and construction of homes and neighbourhoods develop over the next five decades in order to be inclusive regardless of impairment.”

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My preferred pronouns are: she/her

On behalf of:

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Executive Summary

Inclusive design of homes and neighbourhoods won't become 'everyday' until the process of design and construction is inclusive, and those who face societal barriers get their voices heard. This essay suggests three stages to ensuring inclusivity within this process. On a micro scale, these should be viewed as 'steps' to be taken by designers and on a macro scale, short-, medium- and long-term goals for construction industry standards.

Fundamentally, this essay is a manifesto for change within architectural practice and the wider construction industry and a plea for immediate action.

Central to inclusivity is communication. In the interest of clarity, this essay starts by defining key terminology in the context of this study, based on the Social Model of Disability.

Impairment is defined as an individual's short - or long - term, physical, sensory or cognitive difference. Disabled/Disability is the social consequence of having an impairment. Disability is not an individual issue; it is a societal issue.¹ However, things don't have to stay this way. As with all social constructs, barriers can be removed and attitudes can be changed. The Equality Act 2010 definition of disability is for a minimum of 12 months.² It is arguable that it doesn't matter whether an impairment effects a person for 1 day or a lifetime, inclusive environments do not discriminate. That said, the barriers faced by a person with short- and long-term impairments will likely differ, and this should not be overlooked when engaging in the process later outlined in this essay.

When considering the next 50 years, a flexible strategy is crucial.³ Not only will the nature and number of impairments continue to increase, societal barriers will inevitably change too. EDI is complex and by acknowledging that everyone has a different experience of their built environment, one must consider the notion that barriers within society, in some form, will always exist. The aim is that they will be fewer and removed much quicker, but this is reliant on a framework or process, rather than an action plan which is resolute enough to only consider current issues.⁴

The improvements suggested in this essay aside, the design and construction industry will also change over the next five decades. For example, Covid-19 has shown architects new possibilities for working from home in an industry which is well-known for being unaccommodating on this matter. Social distancing measures leading to construction delays on site could be mitigated through offsite prefabrication, other modern methods of construction and robotic machinery. A colleague went on a 'virtual site visit' last week – an

¹ Inclusion London. (2016). Factsheet: The Social Model of Disability. [pdf] London: Inclusive London. Available at https://www.inclusionlondon.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/FactSheets_TheSocialModel_Easy-Read.pdf [Accessed 19 May 2020]

² GOV.UK. Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010 [online] Available at <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

³ WHO.INT Disability and Health [online] Available at <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

⁴ The Creative Independent. How to begin designing for diversity [online] Available at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-begin-designing-for-diversity/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

office first. Covid-19 has meant that able-bodied people are finally gaining an insight into (and can't ignore) the social barriers that disabled people face.⁵

Arguably, the biggest challenge the industry faces today is climate change. But can a design be truly sustainable if it's not inclusive, and visa-versa? To consider inclusivity targets independently from our current climate emergency would be naive. In fact, inclusivity and sustainability have much in common. Both have been backed by sub-standard legislation which allows designers (and clients) to 'box tick', reassured that they have done the 'best that they could' in providing an environmentally and people friendly building. Current Building Regulations (Part M) define three levels of inclusivity – comply with the minimum of these and your building is 'inclusive'.⁶

Just as 'sustainable design' and 'design' are considered to be different, 'inclusive design' and 'design' are still viewed as a separate concepts⁷. Sadly, this essay doesn't contain the answer for the climate crisis, but as a start, designers are more frequently engaging with and working alongside experts when designing buildings and neighbourhoods. Not only can we learn from collaboration with other construction professionals, but also cross-sector knowledge shares. Multidisciplinary input through opening up the consultant process (e.g. to include tech experts) could further imbed resilience and inclusivity into our homes and neighbourhoods.

⁵ Ryan, F. (2020). Covid lockdown opening up world for people with disabilities. The Guardian, [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/20/covid-lockdown-opening-up-world-for-people-with-disabilities> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

⁶ Building Regulations (2010) Approved Document M - Access to and use of buildings: Volume 1 – Dwellings. 2015 edition incorporating 2016 amendments. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/540330/BR_PDF_AD_M1_2015_with_2016_amendments_V3.pdf [Accessed 19 May 2020]

⁷ Morrison, V. (2016). Shouldn't all homes be inclusive?. [Blog] Building Talk. Available at: <https://www.buildingtalk.com/blog-entry/shouldnt-all-homes-be-inclusive/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

But inclusive design isn't exclusive to disability. The principles of the social model of disability can be applied to many diverse characteristics. Physical, organisation and attitudinal barriers within the build environment isolate many different groups and individuals. However, if designers work holistically, they can use this to their advantage when trying to generate change - if a barrier such as stairs effects someone in a wheelchair, someone using a walking stick and someone pushing a pram, it's removal will increase inclusivity for more than one individual/group. However, designers need to understand many different forms of adversity as removing a barrier effecting some, may create one for others.

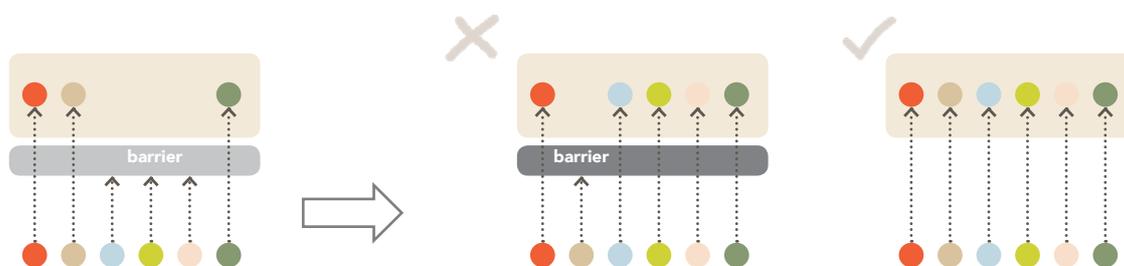


Fig 1: diagram showing how removal of one barrier effecting a number of individuals/groups could create another barrier effecting a different individual/group.

Many people in the construction industry would agree that homes and neighbourhoods should be accessible and inclusive to all but aren't equipped with the tools to ensure that this can truly be achieved. Only 1% of ARB registered architects record themselves as having a disability⁸. Action requires understanding, and the only people who can sincerely understand the adversities that the built environment presents or creates are those who

⁸ RIBA. (2019). Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Strategy: Creating Opportunity and Enabling Success. [pdf] RIBA. Available at <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/riba-edi-strategy-april-2019#available-resources> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

face them every day.⁹ A lack of diversity within the industry leads to a lack of inclusion within homes and neighbourhoods. There is only one way that the design and construction can homes be inclusive, regardless of impairment - those who face adversity have to be part of the design process.

In order to do this, power within the wider industry need to be redistributed. Inclusion needs to be in both the design process and the end product to provide those effected by a development with the feeling of agency and power to be a decision maker.¹⁰ An successful example of co-design for independent living is Enham Trust's housing project Bradbury Place in Hampshire, where the client was a design panel of people with varying impairments and experiences.¹¹ The suggestions in this essay focus on the autonomy of the designer, however, the role of the client is critical in achieving inclusive environments. Architects can't do it alone – considering the traditional client developer, a fundamental shift in priorities is needed with less focus on short term capital costs and more on long-term added value.

Building on Sarah Wigglesworth Architect's EDI vision¹², I suggest that there are three stages to ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion within the design and construction process. On a micro scale these should be viewed as 'steps' to be taken by designers and on a macro scale, short-, medium- and long-term goals for construction industry standards.

⁹ Boys, J. (2014). Disability and ability: towards a new understanding [Featured article] The Design Council. Available at: <https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/disability-and-ability-towards-new-understanding> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹⁰ The Creative Independent. How to begin designing for diversity [online] Available at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-begin-designing-for-diversity/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹¹ Housing LIN. (2017). "A place of my own". Co-designing independent living for people with a learning or physical disability. [pdf] Housing LIN. Available at:

https://www.housinglin.org.uk/assets/Resources/Housing/Practice_examples/Housing_LIN_case_studies/HLIN_CaseStudy_142_BradburyPlace.pdf [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹² Sarah Wigglesworth Architects. Our equality, diversity, and inclusion vision [online] Available at: <https://www.swarch.co.uk/journal/our-equality-diversity-and-inclusion-vision/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

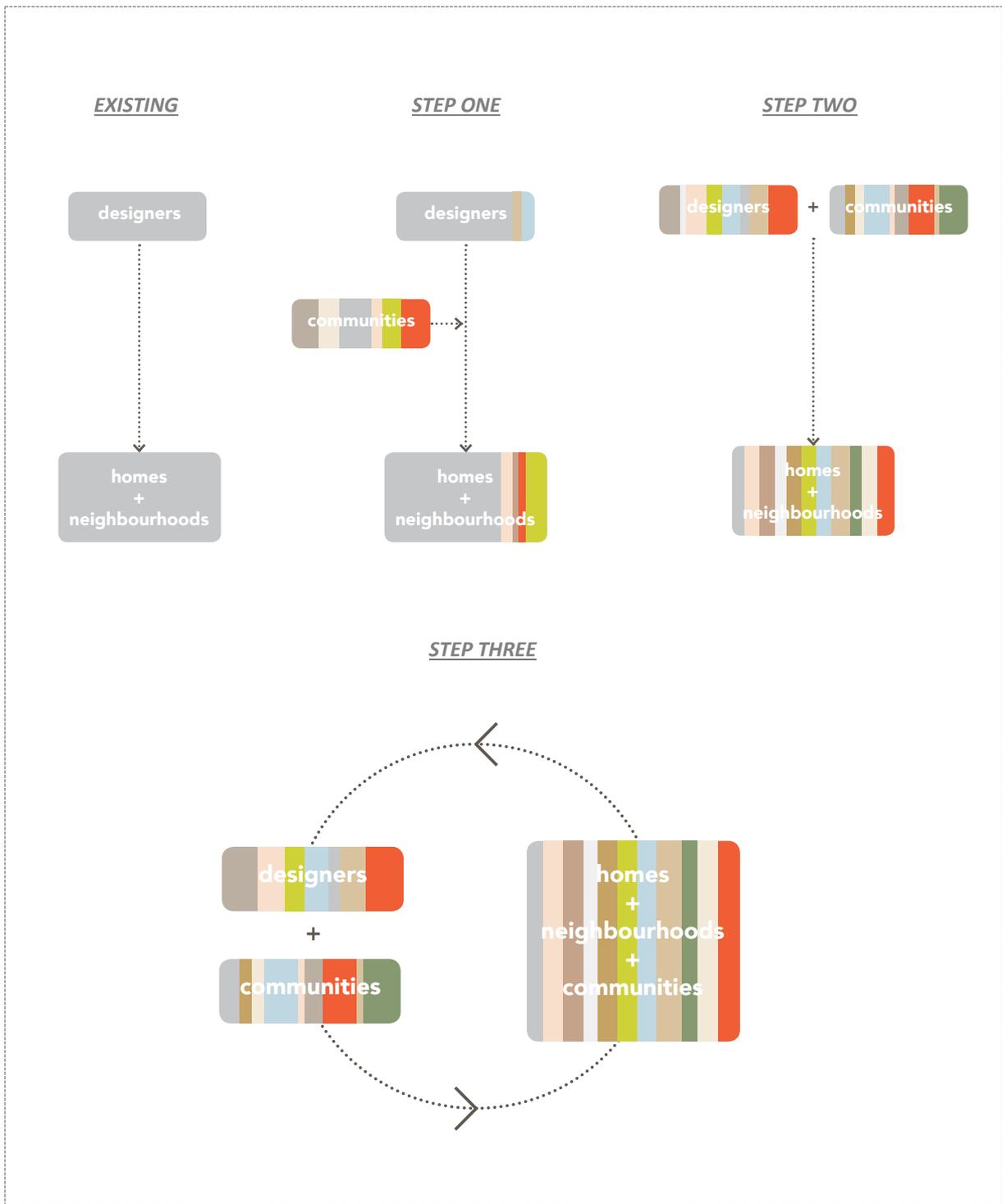
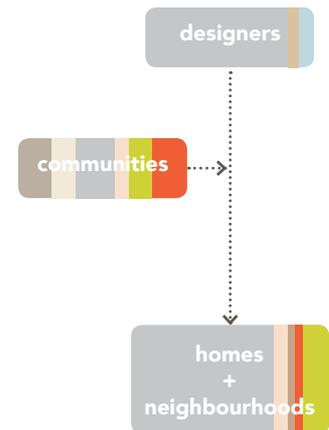


Fig 2: the more diverse that those involved in the design process are, the higher the chance of an inclusive built environment

Step 1: Engagement

At its most basic, step one is a conversation. Designers can gain a greater understanding of societal barriers by communicating with those who have experienced/are experiencing those barriers. Targeted input from individuals can increase the diversity of the design process and subsequently increase the diversity and inclusion of homes and neighbourhoods.



This is the short-term option and could be implemented across design projects immediately. Many architectural project's include community consultation; however, the aspiration should be consistent and meaningful engagement integrated within the design process of every project in every practice. In this context, 'meaningful' differentiates box-ticking consultation (often the same voices) and engagement with underrepresented communities, where a variety of communication tools are used to help marginalised voices be heard. If the client is the homeowner, the design process is likely to reflect their specific needs. The bigger challenge is when the client is building for a speculative end user. Thinking about your 'target' and 'excluded' source community is a start point when selecting those to engage with.

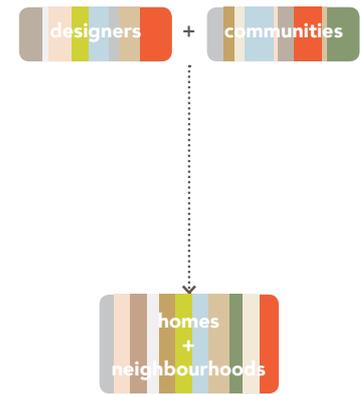
Key to step one is communication and establishing trust. This process is reliant on an explanation or description being provided, carefully listened to and understood. Designers fear tokenizing¹³ - underrepresented people can quickly become misrepresented people. Meaningful conversations are reliant on an openness and transparency that may be uncomfortable for someone facing a barrier. It must be made clear how the source community which is being engaged with will benefit. The aim is a mutually beneficial partnership, not a transaction.¹⁴

¹³ The Creative Independent. How to begin designing for diversity [online] Available at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-begin-designing-for-diversity/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹⁴ The Creative Independent. How to begin designing for diversity [online] Available at <https://thecreativeindependent.com/guides/how-to-begin-designing-for-diversity/> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

Step 2: Education and Employment

Step two ensures that those facing barriers are also those who are designing our homes and neighbourhoods. Increased diversity among designers, whilst also working with communities throughout the design process, equates to an increased chance of more inclusive homes and neighbourhoods.



This is a medium-term goal. Action needs to be taken immediately, however, both the education system as well as the workplace need to be addressed for this step to be successful, which will take time. Change is needed fast, but creation of another box ticking exercise must be avoided.¹⁵

Compared to the overarching student body, students studying architecture are relatively diverse. However, as the nature of impairment isn't defined, this may be higher due to the higher numbers of dyslexic people who study creative subjects. RIBA and ARB currently do not collect information about the number and nature of impairments.¹⁶ As with any process, clear data is essential in measuring change and success. RIBA Education Review group are currently researching new models for architectural education which could make the course more accessible.¹⁷ It's worth highlighting that getting onto the course is often the focus when critiquing architectural education, however, the diversity among teaching staff should not be overlooked.¹⁸

Even if the education system is improved, the industry currently sees a huge drop in the diversity of its workers. Without accessible employment opportunities the retention of underrepresented groups will continue to suffer. In order to trigger change, architectural

¹⁵ Slessor, C. (2018). How do we make architecture more diverse?. Architects Journal, [online]. Available at:

<https://www.architectsjournal.co.uk/opinion/how-do-we-make-architecture-more-diverse/10033461.article> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹⁶ de Graft-Johnson, A, Lucking, K, Manley, S. (2011). Disabled architects: unlocking the potential for practice. Bristol: University of the West of England

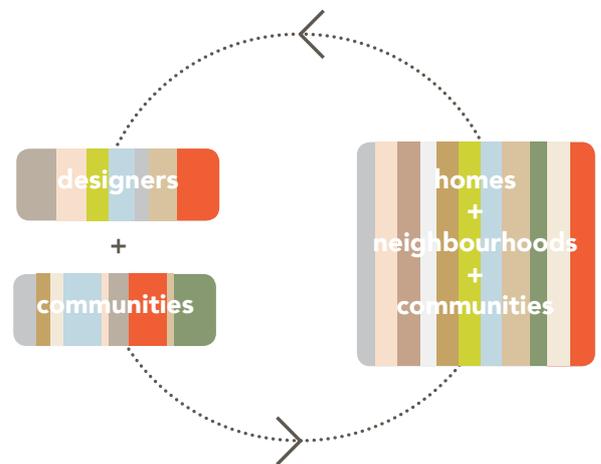
¹⁷ architecture.com. RIBA Education Review (RER) [online] Available at <https://www.architecture.com/knowledge-and-resources/resources-landing-page/riba-education-review#available-resources> [Accessed 19 May 2020]

¹⁸ Sumita, S. (2008). Recognising Diversity in Architecture: Teaching and learning in the context of Diversity. [online] London: Department of Architecture and Spatial Design London Metropolitan University.

practices need to start providing outreach and support to aspiring architects from underrepresented groups. Evenbreak, Celebrating Architecture and Arts Emergency are just a few of the organisations who can help support practices in this mission. However, this also needs to be backed up with a robust and accessible recruitment strategy – there is no point in having an accessible education system without an accessible industry. For example, SWA aim to follow a robust, pre-determined recruitment strategy to enable fair use of positive action if required, to improve the diversity of our office whilst simultaneously hiring the best people for the job.

Step 3: A Circular process

As with sustainable approaches to zero carbon construction, a circular process is required to truly embed resilience in the design and construction of homes and neighbourhoods. Step 3 ensures homes and neighbourhoods are shaped continuously by a diverse set of designers which is reflective of changing communities.



For a process to function at its most efficient, we must continually learn from our mistakes, therefore, this step focuses on feedback and post-occupancy evaluation of all developments, at both a home and neighbourhood level. This is a long-term goal. Individual practices may operate at stage 3, however, for it to be truly successful, it requires steps 1 and 2 to be mastered and for the whole industry to adopt this strategy.

In summary, despite seemingly progressive buildings and construction processes, the UK architecture industry is too often labelled archaic. Architects can't seem to get inclusivity right in the workplace (or in the built environments we are creating) and we **all** have a responsibility to change that. Here is an opportunity for Architects to be at the forefront of equality, diversity and inclusion within the construction industry – let's make sure we take it.