



Green Thinking REVIEW

GTR 85

25 Sep 2026



Promoting Innovations and Best Practices
in Sustainable Building for A Flourishing Future.

Design for Everyone

Can We Really Design
for *Everyone*?



Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish.



Cover:

Every design begins with assumptions about people. We assume how far someone can reach, how quickly they can walk, how clearly they can see, how easily they can read a sign, climb a step, open a door or understand a control. Standards help us translate these assumptions into dimensions and rules.

They are necessary. But the average user they describe does not really exist.

Real people are taller and shorter, younger and older, stronger and weaker. Some walk, some wheel, some need assistance. Some see poorly, hear differently or process information in different ways. Some arrive with children. Others carry luggage. Some are recovering from injury. And all of us change across time.

This is where **Universal Design** offers an important proposition: instead of treating difference as an exceptional condition requiring special correction later, design from the beginning for the widest practical range of people.

But even universality has limits.

No single configuration can perfectly satisfy every human need. Needs may differ—and sometimes conflict.

Particular users may still require adaptation, assistance or specific accommodation.

So perhaps the better ambition is not to pretend that one design can fit everyone. It is to reduce unnecessary exclusion. That changes the questions we ask.

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Editor's Note:

Dear Green Thinkers,

There Is No Average User

Design requires us to simplify. We work with dimensions, standards, occupancy figures and familiar human proportions. They help us turn complex needs into buildings that can actually be drawn and constructed.

But the people who eventually inhabit those buildings are not standard.

We differ in age, mobility, strength, perception, culture, income, family circumstance

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and ways of understanding the world. We also change. A child grows. An adult ages. Someone may experience temporary injury or permanent disability. Families expand and contract. Needs that seemed distant at handover can become central years later.

So what does it really mean to **design for everyone**?

It cannot mean producing one perfect solution that satisfies every person equally. Human difference makes that unrealistic. But neither should difference become an excuse for avoidable exclusion.

The challenge is to begin with a wider understanding of the people who may use a place—to ask who can enter, understand, participate, afford, adapt and belong.

And importantly, inclusion is not achieved only on the drawing board.

A place that works for diverse users today may exclude them tomorrow if its systems fail, its costs rise, its spaces cannot adapt or its management changes.

Perhaps good design is therefore less about finding the mythical average user and more about creating places capable of accommodating **more of the diversity of real life—across time.**

That is the conversation in GTR 85.

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish
— The Editorial Team

GTR Tip

Inclusion is not one design feature. It is the quality of the relationship between people and place.

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👉 Can people enter without being separated from everyone else?

👉 Can they understand where to go?

👉 Can essential facilities be used independently and with dignity?

👉 Can people afford to benefit from the place?

👉 Does its design respect different ways of living?

👉 Can it adapt as occupants age, families change and circumstances evolve?

👉 And will those qualities survive after handover?

Because an accessible lift that cannot be maintained eventually becomes a barrier. An affordable home whose running costs become unaffordable may cease to be inclusive. A flexible space that cannot accommodate changing needs may gradually exclude the very people it once served.

Designing for everyone is therefore not a promise of perfection.

It is a commitment to look beyond the imagined average person and recognise **human difference as an ordinary condition of life.**

Perhaps we cannot design perfectly for everyone. But we can become much better at recognising whom our designs unnecessarily leave out.

And that may be where more inclusive architecture begins.

Green Thinking Insights ***Designing Beyond the Average***

👉 **There is no single normal user.** Human difference is not an exception to design. It is the condition within which design operates.

👉 **Access is not the same as belonging.** A person may be able to enter a place and still feel excluded from its use, culture, services or everyday life.

👉 **Human needs change; good places should be capable of changing with them.** Aging, injury, family change, technology and circumstance continually reshape how people relate to buildings.



Seven Dimensions of Designing for More People

Inclusive design is rarely achieved by one feature. It emerges from many small decisions that make a place easier to enter, understand, use, afford and remain connected to over time.

1. Equitable Access

Entrances, routes and essential facilities should allow people to participate without unnecessary segregation or dependence.

2. Physical Usability

Doors, controls, seating, sanitary facilities, work surfaces and circulation should accommodate different bodies, strengths and modes of movement.

3. Sensory Legibility

Information should not rely on sight or sound alone. Visual, tactile and auditory cues can work together to make places easier to understand.

4. Cognitive Clarity

Simple wayfinding, intuitive layouts and understandable controls reduce confusion and unnecessary dependence.

5. Flexibility & Adaptability

Good spaces anticipate change – in age, family structure, mobility, technology and patterns of use.

6. Affordability & Maintainability

An inclusive solution that cannot be afforded, repaired or kept working may eventually become exclusionary.

7. Participation & Belonging

Design improves when users are not treated only as recipients, but as people whose experience, culture and everyday knowledge can shape the place.



Green Thinking Reflection

👉 The measure of inclusive design is not how many differences it can eliminate, but how many differences it can accommodate with dignity.

👉 Designing for everyone does not mean pretending that human differences disappear. It means creating places generous enough to recognise those differences – and adaptable enough to continue serving people as their lives change.

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Five Questions Before We Call a Place Inclusive

Before we describe a building, public space or neighbourhood as inclusive, it is worth asking a few simple questions.

1. Who might struggle to enter?

Consider the full journey – arrival, drop-off, parking, pathways, thresholds, doors and vertical movement.

2. Who might struggle to understand or navigate it?

Wayfinding, signage, lighting, acoustics and spatial clarity should work for people with different sensory and cognitive needs.

3. Who might struggle to use its essential facilities independently?

Toilets, seating, counters, controls, lifts and service points should support dignity and practical independence.

4. Who might be priced out of its benefits?

Physical access means little if cost, transport, service charges or operating expenses place the space beyond reach.

5. Will it remain inclusive as people and circumstances change?

Ageing, disability, family change, technology, maintenance and management can all alter who a place continues to serve.

Green Thinkers' Challenge

*Walk through one building you know well and imagine five very different users. **Good design does not only ask who can enter. It asks who can continue to belong.***

Green Thinkers' Takeaway

The measure of inclusive design is not how many differences it can eliminate, but how many differences it can accommodate with dignity.

Resources for Further Study

Designing for More People

1. The Principles of Universal Design – NC State University

The classic seven-principle framework remains a useful starting point: equitable use, flexibility, intuitive use, perceptible information, tolerance for error, low physical effort, and adequate size and space for approach and use. Importantly, NC State itself notes that universal usability is only one part of good design; economic, cultural, gender and environmental concerns still matter.

2. ISO 21542:2021 – Accessibility and Usability of the Built Environment

A practical international standard covering access to buildings, circulation, egress, evacuation, fittings and related usability requirements.

3. UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – Article 9

A broader rights-based reference linking accessibility to independent living and full participation in everyday life, including buildings, transport, information and public services.

4. Nigeria: Persons with Disabilities (Accessibility) Regulations, 2023

A useful local reference for understanding accessibility obligations within the Nigerian context.

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Accessibility is not one element in a building. It is a continuous experience. And that experience should survive occupation, maintenance, ageing and change. Because a place is not truly accessible simply because everyone can enter.

They must also be able to participate.



Design to Adapt

Case Study Snippet

Conradie Park, Cape Town, South Africa: **Designed for Diverse Lives**



Conradie Park, Cape Town, South Africa. Photo: Sean Gibson / dhk Architects.

Conradie Park was conceived as more than a housing development. The Western Cape Government describes it as a mixed-use, mixed-income neighbourhood intended to provide **accessible, affordable, sustainable and safe housing**, with homes, shops, schools, medical services, crèches, parks and other daily needs within walking distance. Nearly half of the homes are designated for lower-income households.

The project also attempts to respond to different stages and circumstances of life. Dedicated accommodation was planned for residents over 65, with assisted-living and frail-care facilities nearby, while official project documentation includes provision for disability access.

That makes Conradie Park useful for GTR 85—not because it represents a perfect model, but because it shows what happens when inclusion is considered at neighbourhood scale: **income, age, mobility, proximity and everyday access are treated as interconnected design questions.**

But the project also illustrates a harder truth.

Resident concerns about utility metering, communication, management and access to some amenities have been raised in the Western Cape legislature by an opposition member reporting conversations with tenants. Those concerns should be treated as attributed claims rather than settled findings, but they remind us that inclusive design intent does not automatically guarantee an inclusive lived experience.

Nigeria Focus: **Access Is More Than a Ramp**

In many buildings, accessibility is still treated as something to be added after the main design has already been resolved.

The result may be a ramp at the entrance – while toilets remain difficult to use, circulation is confusing, lifts are unreliable, controls are out of reach, or essential services are located where some users cannot access them independently.

But access begins long before the entrance.

It includes how people arrive, move through a place, understand where they are going, use its facilities, participate in its activities and continue to do so with dignity.

In Nigeria, the challenge is also practical. Inclusive features must be buildable, maintainable and affordable within the realities of local construction, management and everyday use. A solution that works only when everything is functioning perfectly may not remain inclusive for long.

The deeper lesson is simple:

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2040: Buildings That Change With Us

What if buildings were designed with one certainty in mind:

People will change.

A young family may become a multigenerational household. A child becomes an adult. An able-bodied occupant may later experience limited mobility. Technology will evolve. Work patterns will shift. Spaces once used privately may need to become shared.

Yet many buildings are designed as though their first arrangement should last forever.

By 2040, perhaps inclusive design will mean more than providing access on opening day. It may mean creating buildings capable of **adjusting without major disruption**.

Walls could be repositioned. Bathrooms could be adapted without rebuilding entire rooms. Controls could change height or interface. Signage could communicate in multiple ways. Homes could support ageing in place. Public buildings could respond to changing patterns of use without excluding new users.

The smartest future may not be one in which buildings predict every need.

It may be one in which they are designed to **learn, adapt and remain usable as human lives change**.

Perhaps the most inclusive building is not the one that anticipates every future user, but the one capable of adapting when it inevitably fails to.

Design for today. Leave room for tomorrow.



A Question for Today:

Who Is the Building Asking to Adapt?

Think of a building you know well.

Does it adapt to human difference – or does it continually ask people to adapt themselves to the building?

Who moves through it effortlessly, and who must wait, ask for help, take another route or depend on someone else?

That difference may tell us how inclusive the building really is.

GTR Closing Reflection:

Inclusion is not one design feature. It is the quality of the relationship between people and place. And that relationship must remain meaningful across time.

Buildings Change. Lives Flourish.

“

*Well-designed buildings
do not stay the same.
They evolve with the
people inside —
across life stages, needs
and possibilities.*

Floreat Vita | Let Life Flourish.

ADAPT
INCLUDE
SUPPORT
SUSTAIN
FLOURISH



PEOPLE
PLACES
POSSIBILITIES
LONGER LIVES



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