

# Turning back time for inclusion today as well as tomorrow

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**Abstract.** Inclusion is a futuristic concept insofar as it is something for which we are striving, for if it were achieved, no discussion would be needed. Inclusion, as a future-focused endeavor, conveniently allows the legacies of the past to be ignored and prevents us from achieving inclusiveness today. In addition, the interchangeable use of various terms, such as accessible, adaptable and universal, restricts our capacity to achieve inclusion and potentially hinders useful academic debate and effective practical application. The reflections in this paper are the result of work to identify the key factors preventing Australian construction industry professionals from supplying more inclusively designed housing stock.

**Keywords.** Inclusion, universal design, built environment, language, terminology

## Introduction

The concept of inclusion as a social aim is, by definition, something of the future. Inclusion is a worthy aim, but the problem with a future-focused concept is that it can blind us to the actions of the past - a past that visits us in the present as we confront inaccessible older buildings, products and technologies. In the context of disability discrimination and equity, inclusion is not a thing in itself but a social aim, but are we striving for inclusion or inclusiveness? Inclusion has its basis in rights and the fight to be included in the whole. Inclusiveness is based in a concept of wholeness – one whole population. Inclusion is about someone or something being added to something whereas inclusiveness is about having everything within its scope. Whilst this may seem mere semantics, we argue that inclusion and inclusiveness express different standpoints and therefore ask different questions, have different approaches, and perhaps different solutions. Inclusion as a social aim assumes inclusion by increments with a commitment to a desirable future. Inclusiveness demands greater commitment because the underlying value of (w)holism asks for more than time-delayed increments. If we think of inclusion and inclusiveness as different concepts a more fruitful debate can be progressed than if we assume they are essentially the same.

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## **1. The Power of Language**

The words we choose are not value-free but based on our particular view of the world – they are an expression of the way we think, and conversely, the way we think is expressed in words. Words have meanings, connotations, and inferences: they instruct, convey messages, become trademarks and brands. On a superficial level the difference between inclusion and inclusiveness may appear inconsequential, but there are practical and material consequences. Inclusion cannot be described without identifying who is and who is not included, which immediately perpetuates the ‘us and them’ divide in conceptual thinking. ‘Inclusion’ becomes yet another term that together with all other metaphors and euphemisms for non-discriminatory actions perpetuates the ‘us and them’ divide. A perspective of ‘us and them’ encourages problem solving from a standpoint of “we already include us, but now we have to include them”. In turn, this leads to tacked-on solutions instead of an integrated “everyone is included” approach – the foundation of seeking inclusively designed solutions. In addition, thoughts of “we will include them” not only implies there is an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, it also entrenches a future-focused standpoint.

Language creates reality: it has the power to express thought as well as shape it, and it is important therefore, we are clear that we all mean the same thing by those words for a shared understanding to evolve. Consistency of terms is particularly important for the development of sensible economic and political arguments, theory building, and useful dialogue between researchers and practitioners. Separating inclusion as a social aim from inclusiveness as a holistic vision creates space for both to be explored. A vision of inclusion as a step-by-step process limits solutions to those of incremental gains, where such gains are considered only in new and future ventures leaving in place current exclusionary buildings and transport systems, for example. A vision of inclusiveness understood as a holistic term of equity promotes thinking from a wider perspective. It changes the approach from “let them in” to “make sure no-one is left out”. This subtle but important difference can provide a different perspective and approach to solutions. One signifies the giving away of something (haves to have-nots) while the other signifies unity and common ownership. If you follow the first perspective, costs and difficulty will be allowed to stand in the way and the consequences of past ideas will remain, but the second perspective demands the past be remedied, not just those of greatest convenience in new undertakings. There can be no place for old ideas that result in barriers to inclusiveness. A subtle change in terminology can therefore create space for different avenues of thinking to surface allowing other approaches to problems and solutions to emerge.

## **2. What’s in a Name?**

Language surrounding disability and bodily impairment in relation to product and building design particularly, has become a vexed issue as we negotiate our way around various terms<sup>[1]</sup>. Academic texts, technical manuals, disability advocacy websites, legislation, regulations, government and industry publications use a multitude of terms to variously describe both special and general products and designs for people with disability and older people. Generally terms fall into one of two main categories: those that have their roots in legislation and disability rights, and those that focus on design outcomes rather than any specific group of people.

The problem with having so many terms is knowing which one to use and when. ‘Accessible’ has a past that belongs in civil rights and is used throughout disability discrimination legislation and related building codes which focus exclusively on people with disabilities. Hence, ‘accessible’ has become a regulatory term. ‘Visitable’ also has its roots in civil rights, the right to visit people in their own homes, and is also a regulatory term. In England and Wales, Part M of the building code reflects elements of visitability, which are now mandatory. ‘Lifetime Homes’ in the UK and ‘adaptable housing’ in Australia are extensions of visitability, but with emphasis on housing older people as a social problem rather than one of rights. Whilst accessibility, adaptability and visitability are measured against codes or norms, ‘usability’ is not rights-based but a person-centred measure of the degree to which a person can perform within, and interact with, a building or product<sup>[2]</sup>. As such, it forms one of the basic tenets of universal design<sup>[3]</sup> which embraces usability as well as rights-based terms such as accessible. Universal design automatically includes people with a disability, but the semantic difference is that it is not *exclusively* for people with a disability, which is implied by ‘accessible’ designs. Other terms used in the same philosophical context as universal design are ‘design-for-all’, and ‘inclusive design’. The term ‘barrier-free’, although initially used in the early days of disability activism, evolved into the concept of universal design<sup>[4]</sup>. This number of terms is confusing and people default to the common theme of disability, therefore these things are for the disabled<sup>[5]</sup>. Hence we have yet another term, ‘disabled’ which is applied to public toilets, parking places, ramps, and housing among others. Using ‘disabled’ instead of the grammatically correct term ‘accessible’ is a very public announcement of ‘us and them’ thinking. Nevertheless, the term ‘disability’ is not without its problems.

The social model of disability has taken precedence over the previously dominant medical model to the point where debate on medical interventions and bio-ethics has been stifled for fear of further entrenching already negative societal attitudes<sup>[6,7]</sup>. Until recently, disability has meant both bodily impairment and the barriers caused by societal attitudes. ‘Disabled’ is commonly used to describe a person considered to have an impairment, but having an impairment does not necessarily make a person disabled, rather they are disabled by negative social attitudes due to their condition<sup>[7]</sup>. The current discourse separates ‘disability’ as a social construct from ‘impairment’ as a bodily condition. Creating this division allows the parallel endeavors of disability rights and medical interventions to co-exist without one casting aspersions upon the other. Benefits can now be gained from both without the inference upheld by social model advocates that the medical model devalues people with disabilities<sup>[8]</sup>. Space for both to grow is created when one is not subsumed by the other, and when meanings become clearer and there is consistency in terms. Word choice can, therefore, lead to different approaches to issues, ask different questions and result in different outcomes.

### **3. Talking the Same Language**

Terminology clarification is essential for theory building as well as practical application. Actors within and between disciplines discuss basic concepts and use them to frame official documents and reports without necessarily having a shared understanding. There is a tendency to assume that the various actors apply the same meanings to the words. The first step in theory development is the positioning and definition of concepts – something the ICF emphasizes<sup>[9]</sup>. Iwarsson and Stahl argue:

“In practice, theory is completely hidden while norms and codes of practice take precedence and guide decision making and action”<sup>[10]</sup>. This claim was recently illustrated in a tender document devised by the New South Wales Government<sup>[11]</sup> for social housing, where all terms (accessible, adaptable, universal, visitable, seniors, disabled and general) were utilized with guidelines as to which design features constituted each one, many of them overlapping. Utilising all terms as a means of dealing with the confusion only serves to confound issues further. The lack of a common reference point is likely to result in flawed decision-making where the construction industry is left to decipher the document. Where well-developed theory is lacking, community norms and industry codes of practice guide not only research, but the approach to and biases within research. From a research perspective, a standpoint of a ‘normal’ population brings about different results to a standpoint of ‘one whole’ population. The normal population approach creates the separate (non-normal) accessibility conceptualization of solutions, whereas a one population approach offers more effective results for inclusiveness as demonstrated by the Norwegian experience.

Norway has embraced a one population perspective and indeed, developed a different approach, resulting in a different model of problem-solving. The Norwegian Government carried out a study and found there was an inability to understand that inclusion was relevant to everyone’s work and discipline<sup>[12]</sup>. Inclusion was seen as a social services department responsibility – a position that is clearly based on ‘us and them’ with ‘them’ being someone else’s business. As a result, basic principles of inclusiveness based on the Principles of Universal Design<sup>[3]</sup>, were applied to statutory instruments, codes and policies as a quality assurance tool. Used as a key performance measure, the principles are used as means of analyzing the extent to which inclusiveness is implemented. This approach not only dealt with practical issues, but challenged the attitudes of the bureaucracy towards people with disabilities and older people. Applying inclusiveness to planning concepts rather than design details makes a rights-based politically negotiated process superfluous as all departments, not just the social services department are now responsible for inclusiveness<sup>[12]</sup>. In this situation, language is much more likely to become consistent because problem-solving thinking has one focus point: designing universally, for everyone, rather than one specific group.

#### **4. Building on Old Ground or New Territory?**

Disagreement on terms and changing labels indicates language is not something to be dismissed lightly. Inclusion and inclusiveness are concepts that use different standpoints: inclusion looks outward at those who are not included, while inclusiveness looks at whether anyone is now excluded. Inclusiveness will not be achieved by the stealth of inclusion-by-increment, but through a language that views the population as one whole. The discourse surrounding inclusion as a rights-based term also sanctions notions of hardship and burdens (‘us’ giving to ‘them’), where attitude change is unlikely, and where inclusion becomes a socially negotiated process. The discourse surrounding inclusiveness sidesteps the negotiation process and makes it everybody’s business.

The jump from the paradigm of ‘inclusion by increments’ to a paradigm of ‘one whole population’ lays in the language we adopt and the meanings we assign to terms. When we have the language the ideas will follow, but this demands consistency in academic debate as well as practical application. Agreement on language use and

terminology is important for future research and debate and for theory building. Standing squarely in the way of a truly inclusive world are economic arguments. The inclusion model is easily hi-jacked by concepts of undue burdens on the public purse and/or the balance sheets of private enterprise. The loud voice of immediate costs to correct the past drowns out the voices of those willing to count the present and future costs of *not* implementing inclusiveness throughout society<sup>[13]</sup>. Because the premise of “it costs too much” goes unquestioned, solutions are focused on new products, services and environments. Consequently a strong counter argument is urgently required. With a deeper understanding of terminology, the underlying principles and their effects, we are in a better position to call for economic analyses that build strong arguments for inclusiveness - not just for future creations, but to remedy past practices as well. Social justice arguments are valid, but they alone are insufficient to win the day for inclusion, let alone inclusiveness. The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities demands we redress the past as well as the future. Well constructed economic arguments, based not just on immediate costs of remedial work, but on the costs of *not* implementing remedial work are required. A vision of one whole population where (disability) rights are no longer contested automatically demands that we turn back time for inclusion so that inclusiveness is manifest at all times.

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