

Appendix ARP Blog 7: Previous Years Students Focus Group Transcript

Date: 19 November 2025

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Participants: Three second-year BA Architecture students (anonymised as Student 1, Student 2, Student 3)

Duration: 41.20

Context: Exploratory focus group with previous year's students to understand their experiences of learning about inclusive design during their first year.

Note: This transcript has been transcribed with the help of AI tools and edited by the researcher. Further details and reflections of this process are captured on the blog.

Introduction

Researcher: I want to talk about inclusive design. When you think back to your first year, what comes to mind when you hear the term inclusive design?

Student 1: To me, accessibility. Yeah, that was a big part of our course, especially for our brief of making our building fully accessible, which is one of the rules in the UK as far as I learned.

Researcher: And what do you mean by accessible?

Student 1: Allowing for any individual to go anywhere within a space without any difficulty or barrier that they could cross.

Student 2: I thought of it in a different way. I thought of when we were doing our own design processes and we had chats and pinups about our work, and everyone had their own opinion about our work. So it gave us a wider opinion and a broad view of how we could change our own designs. And in a way, having conversations about a single work and having different perspectives to it made it much more inclusive for other people to be able to understand the design.

Student 3: I was answering in terms of the learning environment rather than architecture. I mean, I think an inclusive environment would be a space where multiple ways of teaching or speaking is used, so that way each method can be tailored to a specific kind of learner. So some people prefer speaking to other people, other people prefer writing things down or presenting, or maybe getting some feedback, or doing a task or some sort of game for them to progress in their design development or in their project.

Researcher: Wonderful. Thank you for sharing that.

Researcher: Let's go back to perhaps Student 1's point about accessibility or designing for different people's needs. When we talk about that as a terminology of inclusive

design, where did you first encounter ideas of inclusion or equity or access in your architecture education?

Student 3: I think I first learned about it last year, but especially this year because my brief is about third spaces. I've got to expand a lot on that, because in order to design a good and working third space, you need to make sure that people feel comfortable and are included for them to be able to use it.

Researcher: Talk to me a little bit more about first year. Do you remember when in first year? Was it like day one, this is it, or at the end you had an understanding?

Student 3: I think it was throughout the design process, especially what Student 1 mentioned about making it accessible using ramps and lifts and other ways of designing so that everyone can access a space. That was very important, and especially when we had the lecture about those types of connections between floors or between levels. I think that was the first time I really thought about that and encountered it fully during that lecture, which was, I would say, in the middle of the year.

Researcher: Unit two?

Student 1: I feel like I heard it earlier, to be honest. I heard it when we first discussed our brief. I think it was something that comes across, like the space is accessible. But I think through first year you realise how much more of a role it can play within design than I actually thought of. Obviously, if you're someone who needs the accessible things, then I think it becomes a lot more present to you than others. For example, I think to me it wasn't something that I even thought about, if I'm being honest.

Student 3: I actually was thinking that maybe even we were introduced to it also in the very first project with the kids, the teaching machine. Because that was very challenging, especially designing for children. Obviously, for one, they're a lot more different than the typical user that we usually work with. And also they're not as predictable. They have different interests. And even just height-wise and ability-wise, designing a machine was challenging. And that took some consideration of how accessible can it be.

Student 2: For me, I'd say at the last unit when we were doing the site analysis all together, with the tracing papers and stuff, and we started noting down where we found the most suitable accessibility for us. And we actually looked onto the map and discussed where there's the residential spaces, where's the cloud space, opportunities. And when we started getting everything that we see into consideration rather than only seeing a map, I then actually started understanding how accessibility could be understood from just looking at somewhere and how it's affecting our design.

Student 1: I also started realising how many spaces aren't accessible.

Researcher: Would you like to expand on that?

Student 2: Yeah. I mean, when you go, especially in the tubes, sometimes I see, for example, a person in a wheelchair. Yes, a lot of tube stations are accessible, but not all of them. Or they're very hidden or difficult to find. Not in terms that I can clearly see an easy accessible route for any type of person when I'm going to the Circle Line or whatnot.

Student 3: Or even maybe they're accessible, but it's still not easy for use. You still have some of the things that you need to have because obviously they need to follow regulations, but they're done in a way so that they cover the regulations, but it's still not as easy as it should be for it to be used.

Student 1: I hate accessibility.

Researcher: The next question was, do you have a particular position on the need to design inclusively?

Student 1: I think in social spaces, yes. But if I'm designing something for a specific user in mind, I don't understand why I have to consider any of the other possible users.

Student 2: Like a two-storey house for a couple to live in, accessible for everyone. I don't think there's a reason why we need to have all the considerations of every accessibility for just a simple user group.

Student 1: If it's something you can consider it, but sometimes it can disrupt us or be a constraint.

Student 3: It can be a lot more expensive as well, because if you want to make a ramp or have an elevator, that is a lot more money than having stairs. And designing that for a home, for a private space that does not necessarily need those things, is not very cost efficient.

Student 3: I actually have a question. Last year I was thinking about this a lot because of the whole ramp thing that I had to deal with. I don't understand how it works for apartment buildings. So you need an elevator and stairs. There is a fire, there's an emergency, you can't use the elevator. What happens? You don't have a ramp going down the whole building.

Researcher: If you use the stairs, you can go down. If not, there is a fire strategy in place if you are a disabled user where you will have a safe space for you to wait so that the fire brigade can come.

Student 1: But what if it's not a fire, if it's something else? An earthquake that would immediately need to evacuate, not stay in a safe space.

Researcher: That's a very good point. I guess at the moment we don't really design to that because we're not an earthquake aware zone. But it's a very good point.

Were there any moments in the first year when you actively applied inclusive design in your work or realised that you didn't?

Student 2: To some extent, I think I did. I could have done it way more detailed, but I didn't really want to have it as a major part of my design because we were already designing for a very tiny space. And having an elevator, I think, was enough for that project. But as she said, what if the electricity is cut off? What if something happens? Then there should be more other options because we're in front of the canal. There isn't any other escape from the space that you're in, so we could have thought way more detailed and technically into it. I think I didn't do it. I could have done more, but I didn't want to give up so much space for that.

Student 3: I think also it was very difficult because it was our first serious proper project that we had. And considering that everyone was trying to figure out even just the design or even how to tie their concept, the house workshop, the design of the building and all of that, you kind of leave it behind. For me personally, I couldn't focus on that because I was still trying to figure out how to do my very first proper project of a building that's two-storey and that had a lot of technical things that I had never done before.

Researcher: Do you feel that now in second year you're in a better position to consider it?

Student 3: Yeah.

Student 2: I don't think so. I still don't want to make it a huge consideration about my project.

Researcher: Because?

Student 2: Because I think the design itself is more important than only figuring out the stairs and everything else. But this year, for example, I'm planning to do a one-floor thing, not a second floor, so I don't have to add stairs into it.

Student 1: I mean, the first time that I understood about the accessibility was, I think, halfway through the design process. We kind of all had our designs and then we realised that the accessibility is a forced aspect that needs to be considered on all planes and all floors of every location of our space or design or whatever you want to call it. But then this year, I mean, we haven't even touched on the subject yet. I mean, the design process of it has just started, I would say, for us at least, very minimally.

Student 3: I also think that in real life it wouldn't be as difficult for us to include it properly into our design as it was, for example, last year. Because last year, I personally don't even think it was necessary for every single part to be accessible. And also, we had our site, the fact that you had to go down basically five metres. My ramp was probably 40 or more metres long. So it was making it even more difficult with the site and with everything else.

Student 1: I think it's very CSM.

Researcher: The topic of inclusive design? That's really interesting, could you expand?

Student 1: Well, maybe not very CSM, but very UAL. I mean, it's a school that encourages inclusivity, but also maybe even standing out and almost being proud of, it's a very diverse community. I mean, you see everything in this school. In a good way. I met so many cool people.

Researcher: People from all corners of the world.

Student 1: And I think that's more celebrated in this school than in other schools. But also for it being our first project that they did, I think it was a good introduction. First, always have it in the back of our mind. And also sustainability is a big factor. It was kind of being pushed in the back of our minds. Not pushed in the back of our minds, but always a factor that has to be considered at all times.

Student 3: But what's actually interesting is that that's literally exactly like how Student 1 said it. But then at the same time, we have never actually had a proper sit-down, proper lecture genuinely explaining how to make a place accessible. Other than the lecture that was just some images. But I'm talking technical. Actually explaining, okay, this is how you approach if you have this constraint in your site or in your design. This is how you approach it. This is how you do this.

Researcher: I think what felt clear missing or challenging about inclusive design in the first year in terms of were you able to build your knowledge, your understanding, or also your position on the topic? So you touched upon the knowledge of understanding the technical aspects of it. You didn't feel that there was enough in first year.

Student 3: Yeah. So it was very difficult for us to approach it and think about it considering we didn't even know much about it. So when you're kind of rushing in your stress that you won't be able to even finish your AutoCAD and then you have this thing that you also have to include in your design. But you have to also just now start to learn about it on your own. It makes it a lot more difficult for you to put more effort into it and properly include it. Whereas if there was maybe a proper presentation a little before the project about how in different designs or sites, with these constraints, this is how different architects have approached the issue. Then we would have a clearer image or maybe even a lecture on why it's so important. Because we do talk about how UAL is inclusive, diverse and everything. But then we don't actually have a proper sit down. Why is it inclusive? What makes it inclusive? Just specifying. We just know it is, but we don't know how.

Researcher: Thank you, Student 1, you started saying you thought the topic had been addressed?

Student 1: Yeah, so I mean how I understood it. Obviously it's first year, so I think we're moving through the project quite quickly. They were giving us examples of different accessible methods or whatnot, but then that wasn't correlated between the actual technical side. I don't like how they teach the technical at all.

Student 2: We don't get taught anything technical. We learn how to do it.

Student 1: I couldn't tell you how a building stands up. And I don't think 80% could either.

Researcher: Columns, foundations.

Student 2: No, we didn't learn anything. Conceptually we did, but technically and logically we didn't.

Student 1: Are you also speaking about inclusivity in other types and not just accessibility, like physical? Are you also talking about how the person feels in a space?

Researcher: Please expand on that.

Student 1: Well, you know, there's like people are different and people feel more comfortable or less comfortable in different spaces. Their background, how they grew up, their culture. And I don't think that was really highlighted on at all. I mean, the inclusivity of spaces for different... Actually, I mean, it was slightly when we were looking at in the analysis of all the different cultures and everything in Camden. That's as far as it went. Some people obviously then did spaces more focused on specific communities within Camden, but it wasn't as highlighted on as the school makes it seen. Not that I think it's a good idea that one has to do this.

Researcher: Expand

Student 1: To do a whole building that's specified to only one culture or anything like that. Some people are less interested in that than others, and I think that's okay. But of course, it's also important that everyone feels comfortable within a space. I mean, like the Romans are more comfortable showering together than other people.

Researcher: I'll use that quote specifically.

Student 1: Perfect

Researcher: Do you think throughout all of these, reflecting on that yourself in first year, maybe even now, do you think that you've been in an environment that has allowed you to develop your own position on the topic?

Student 2: Yes. Definitely, yes.

Researcher: How might that have been different with some of the other bits that you're saying that were missing from the conversations?

Student 2: The missing parts were more of the technical parts, but what we design and what we want to include in our design, we could easily say we want this, we don't want this as a part of our design because we are creating it. But some things like the columns and stuff, we had to have, but we didn't know how to have them. Not everything was up to us to create and design and include.

Researcher: What about, and student 1 you started speaking about this, when we've been speak about inclusive design we quiet quickly went onto accessibility and the need for access, level access via lifts, via ramps and we touched a little about culture and what that might mean, what about other aspects of inclusive design do you feel that you understand at the moment?

Student 2: I generally didn't have a wide opinion about it last year when we were designing, but our media tutor told me we could have shared bedrooms or shared showers for guests and people living in the house, and I wasn't really open to any sort of that much of an inclusive design. I got to know about it, I got to hear of it, but then I didn't want it as a part of my design. So we just heard about it, we considered them, but then it was up to us to make it as inclusive as we wanted it to be. And I don't think any of our designs were really that much inclusive. It was just for a specific purpose of use.

Student 3: I think it was good and bad, the fact that we weren't given as much information. Good, because I think that's why we have the opinions that we have right now, because we were able to learn on our own and kind of decide on what stance we want to take. And if maybe we were given a lot more lectures, maybe then our opinion would be more swayed on what is being taught other than what we found on our own and what speaks to us as designers. But one thing that should be considered when it comes to inclusivity is gender.

Researcher: Could you please expand?

Student 3: So there is this thing that I came across when I was doing research for my current project, which is that apparently third spaces are not designed for girls.

Student 1: What are third spaces?

Student 3: Third spaces is, first space is work, second space is home, and then third space is a place where you go and hang out in your free time, like a café, a bar, a park, a library. For anyone, for any use. But there was this thing that they don't design for girls. There are certain things that girls would need in a space to feel safer, to feel more comfortable, and that's lacking in a lot of spaces.

Researcher: Did you have any conversations about gendered architecture?

Student 1: Yeah, in our lecture series. We also had a girl who graduated the year before who did a project and then went on to making this studio or whatever, more focusing on design related to identity, gender, sex, and all the things.

Researcher: Different demographics.

Student 3: There is an age discrimination. A lot of people get, for example, teenagers, they don't get designed for it. People either design for children or for young adults, but that middle bit is lost. No one's designing for them. It's always one side, which is children, young kids, or it's...

Student 1: Well doesn't that make sense?

Student 3: Well, no, because you're losing that very important group that's also, those are the ages where you need to be socialising. Meanwhile, now, because there is a lack of these spaces for teenagers, there is a loneliness pandemic and people being anti-social.

Student 2: It's their choice, though. There isn't a limit for teenagers to not be accessed to any space.

Student 3: There is. Because it's either complaints about noise, because everyone wants to protect their own peace. It's also the fact that they don't have an allowance as big as an adult or someone who's working, meaning that they can't just every single day sit at a café and have to pay for water and a Coke Zero and service charge £15 or £10. They don't have that kind of money. Also, they were kicked out of malls during COVID.

Student 1: But if you go to a café with your teenagers, you can't... You get a certain allowance, that's how much you spent. You don't have to be able to go to a five-star restaurant.

Student 3: Where do you go, though?

Student 2: There are parks, there's gymnasiums, there are cinemas.
(Discussion continues about accessible spaces for different age groups and financial constraints)

Researcher: If we think about this sort of exposure of, in education, beyond just introduction of what inclusive design is, do you think the methodologies that were used, you've spoken predominantly about lectures, were the right format, or what else do you think would have been good for you to develop your position on it, but also your understanding of what inclusive design is or could be?

Student 1: I mean, at first I was thinking, you know, experience it firsthand. But obviously that's... I mean, in my high school, I think in the fourth grade, we had a project about inclusive design, and we had to go roll around in wheelchairs. I mean, it wasn't obviously very helpful, to be honest.

Researcher: So if you're not trying to experience it yourself, what else could you do?

Student 2: Just to visually understand how things work. Because just by hearing it, you can't, I don't think, understand the actual reality of how important accessibility is and how it works. Because I personally haven't been on a wheelchair, so I don't know how it feels or how it's hard to push someone from a certain space to another. So just knowing how it actually works would help designing the accessibility also.

Student 3: I mean, maybe making it the theme of the project, in a way. If I'm speaking for last year, if maybe it was incorporated more even during our studio sessions, if it was made... If it was consistently repeated and made to be a sub-theme of the project, I think that we would have been able to look into it and consider it a lot more.

Researcher: Do you think if you had access to other tools rather than conversations from an academic in terms of videos and an understanding of different things, or a person coming in to speak to you about the topic, do you think you could learn better from lived experience?

Student 1: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. So, I mean, I did an internship this summer and I helped design the thing that brings the wheelchair, the machine that brings the wheelchair. And it's crazy how much you learn from looking at one physically and turning it on and turning it off. I mean, it's really designed to every single slight little specific thing that could possibly come across your mind. And that helped my understanding of that a lot more than how I learned, oh, it's just a ramp or an elevator.

Researcher: Also, in terms of learning environments, you've been in larger lectures where you've got over hundreds, and you're having your lectures. You have had the studio sessions that we've had, which have been much more design-focused. Do you think either one of those environments or an alternative would be best to have these sorts of conversations around to help you develop your understanding of inclusive design and question it, but also talk about it and have different opinions?

Student 2: Smaller groups.

Researcher: What does that allow you if you've got a smaller group?

Student 2: Then you can have discussions, share opinion. I personally wouldn't want to ask a question or share my opinion about something that I'm clueless about in front of a hundred people and wait for their opinion back, because no one would want to give back an opinion in such an environment. But as if we were sitting maybe 20 people together, it's way easier to get your idea through and get the feedback from it.

Student 3: I mean, I feel like I'm very outspoken. I don't have as much of an issue saying something during a session, but it does get a little demotivating when no one else is doing it. I mean, I don't know how that could be fixed, but I do think that that's a very big part, that there is no discussion because everyone's just silent. There's just one or two people answering every single time.

Researcher: What about... has anyone done a debate before? Had a debate, yeah. How have you found your experiences of debate?

Student 1: Fun. I mean, you've got to discuss it and kind of like a role play type of role play, like you get to play a role in a situation, you know, there's like lawyers and you're defending your opinions with the information that you have while also hearing another side. I mean, okay, this is more of a debate in a lawyer type of sense, what I've done. But yeah, a debate, you can hear other people's opinions and I guess argue, but more in an acceptable way. Or not argue, yeah, discuss in a more acceptable way. You already see the person in front of you. And then I guess you're also then asking for someone to counter your idea or your opinion on something that you can learn from.

Student 2: Yeah, I think it's challenging.

Student 3: We did a similar thing though. The podcast was kind of like that.

Student 1: That actually was nice. I like that.

Researcher: Expand a bit on this.

Student 3: So we had a task for contextual studies, which was a podcast where we were in groups of four or five and everyone had to read a different text and we had to discuss with each other what each text is saying, what is the point of view, and kind of debate with each other or have a discussion about the different points of view. So that was kind of similar to that and you get to learn a lot about other texts and other people's opinion and what they found from the additional research.

Researcher: And what is it about learning about other people's opinions? What does that allow you?

Student 3: Well, not everyone has the same point of view on anything really. So once you hear someone else's point of view on a certain thing, then you can kind of zoom out and look at the bigger picture, and that can potentially unblock you if you're not...

Student 1: Also being exposed to other ideas. I mean, that's one of the big main things that I learned coming to London. You get exposed to things and that's how you learn also from different opinions.

Researcher: Allow you to then perhaps change your opinion or strengthen your opinion. So for example, you've heard from Student 3 that they're learning more about gendered spaces at the moment. And it may have been something that you wouldn't have thought about, but you maybe with a wider conversation may understand that it is a serious concern. And you may change your dial or you might just have an understanding and then be able to take your own position.

Student 1: Exactly.

Researcher: Have you ever taken the time or had the opportunity to really consider your own needs in inclusive design and understand your own lived experience within a city or a place, and the needs that you need?

Student 2: Yes, personally, wherever I go, I prioritise having my own personal little space in every area that I go to. And I don't like to share a metre square with anyone. I personally want to have my distance in certain places. And sometimes you just don't have it. And I don't think that's the type of inclusive design I want to have because it's inclusive, but also too much of my personal space to an extent that I don't want to include anyone. So it's like a...

Researcher: You've started to understand what you need from physical space.

Student 2: Yeah

Researcher: Anybody else? Have you ever explored your own moments of feeling included or excluded and started to understand what you then might need?

Student 1: I feel like I'm not sure this is what you're asking about, but when I walk home, and especially now that it's getting dark early, there is this really small corner. If you're walking this way, and you kind of have a small corner here, but it's not lit. So as a woman, it's like you don't realise it until you walk past it, and you see that you don't have any visibility in that small corner, and it's not lit. And you just feel like, oh, maybe there's someone, maybe you're just paranoid, but it would be more inclusive if places like that where someone could potentially hide or stand, and it's in the shadow, it could just be a light. That is one way to make design more inclusive.

Student 1: I don't think I think about what I specifically need while I'm designing. When you're coming across situations, even in your own apartment, you're like, I wish that could be different, I wish this could be different. This would make this easier. I mean, even the fact of how we did last year, with organising the space from the interior, well, I mean, that's how I see accessibility more than the exterior or something. How you walk around a space and how you move a space and what's to your right and what's to your left makes a very big difference to if this was on there and that was there.

Researcher: Perfect, thank you for that

End of transcript