

Adaptive Spaces

Building Belonging

REPORT

CBRE RESEARCH





Key takeaways

01

ONE SIZE FITS NO ONE

The way an individual interacts with space can depend on permanent, temporary or situational circumstances. Building belonging relies on choice, flexibility and a clear framework in place to capture different perspectives.

02

OUTSOURCE EXPERTISE AS AND WHEN REQUIRED

Recognise where and when you need external support. If you don't have the expertise internally – hire a specialist and learn from them.

03

BE COMFORTABLE BEING UNCOMFORTABLE

Building trust is an essential part of the process, and to do this, it is important to demonstrate respect and improve your literacy around inclusive language. Be open and clear with your intentions and purpose, and start having those difficult conversations – this is where true change will happen.

04

START EARLY, FINISH NEVER

As the context evolves, the needs and expectations will evolve as well, look at your workplace as something that needs to adapt and iterate as time passes. Don't wait for a lease event to make changes, often problems are simple to fix once you know what they are.

05

DESIGN FOR THE RANGE, NOT THE AVERAGE

Put people at the heart of the process and acknowledge that everyone has different needs, preferences and abilities. By involving as many people as possible in all stages of the design, you will understand differing perspectives and experiences. This will help create a sense of belonging and will ultimately benefit everyone who uses the space.

“

Inclusive Design is a methodology, born out of digital environments, that enables and draws on the full range of human diversity.



Most importantly, this means including and learning from people with a range of perspectives.

Microsoft

”

01 — Inclusivity is more than accessibility

Globally, [over 1 billion people](#), about 15% of the population, experience accessibility issues. This is only increasing, largely due to an ageing population, and it is estimated that nearly everyone will experience some form of accessibility issue in their lifetime.

In this context, there has been a large focus on making workplaces accessible, but this simply isn't enough. Where accessibility has largely focused on minimum standards to support physical access and remove barriers, [inclusive design](#) goes beyond this and ensures that a workplace is suitable, comfortable and usable.

The principle of inclusive design is to support the full range of human diversity. While accessibility focuses on accommodating differing abilities between people, inclusive design focuses on *differing perspectives*, and bringing these into the design process. The focus is on fulfilling as many user needs as possible, not just as many users as possible.

However, inclusive design is something that is still largely overlooked. In [a social sustainability survey](#) carried out last year, 36% of CBRE clients said that inclusive design was either “very important” or “so important that the decision would turn on it”. However, 32% felt that it was “not important at all” or even “not relevant” to real estate.

There is a huge opportunity within the real estate industry to embrace inclusive design, not least because it can play an important part in creating positive sustainable impact and supporting ESG and DE&I goals.

The [World Health Organization](#) encourages us to see accessibility in terms of ‘mismatched human interactions’. These mismatches are demonstrated using a “persona spectrum” and can be permanent, temporary, or situational.

Figure 1: An example of persona spectrum from Microsoft's Inclusive Design Toolkit

Permanent



One arm

Situational



New parent

Temporary



Arm injury

Source: [Microsoft Inclusive Design Toolkit](#)

02 — It's more than the physical space, it's the experience

When we talk about inclusive design, we often think about the physical or the 'built' environment first. However, we need to start thinking about inclusive design, as it applies to the whole workplace experience. For people to feel like they truly belong to a space, we must consider the physical, human and digital components in combination with each other.

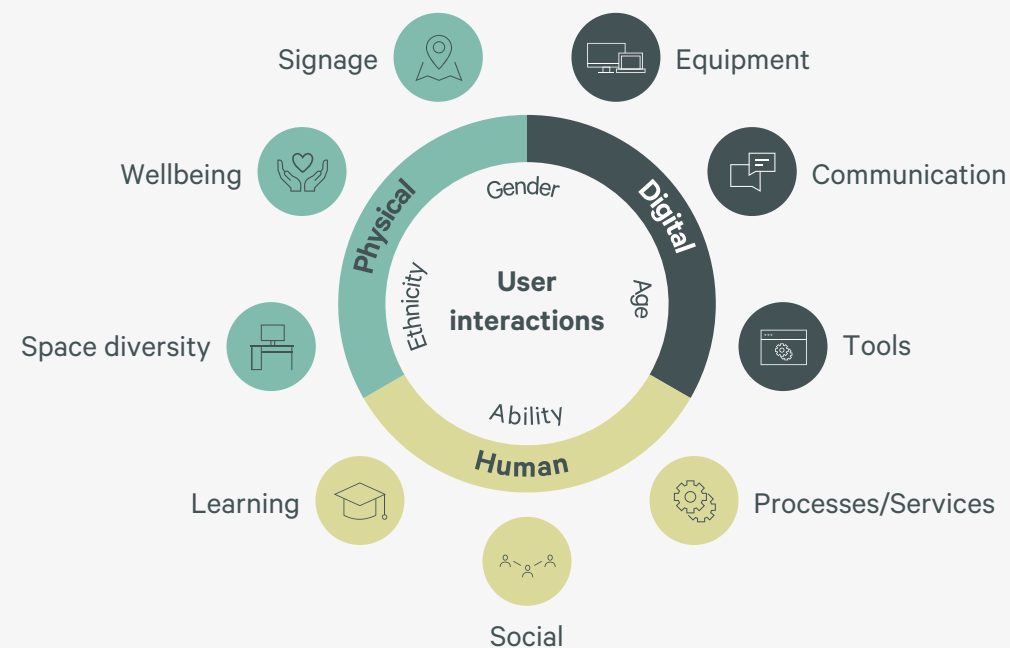
There are a number of physical considerations that need to be made to ensure an inclusive experience. The key to making a space usable is to ensure as much flexibility and choice as possible. For instance, to make spaces inclusive from a neurodiversity perspective, ensure a mix of hypersensitive (e.g. focus rooms, library and quiet areas) and hyposensitive spaces (e.g. cafes and open collaborative areas). Consider incorporating biophilia to mitigate stress, and contribute to the health and wellbeing of occupants.

From a human perspective, it is important that all employees should feel a sense of belonging and be empowered to be their authentic self. Individuals of all backgrounds, gender, age and abilities should be able to navigate a space in a way that supports their social needs, for instance meeting with and learning from colleagues. The facilities and services within a building should create a both seamless and inclusive experience, catering for the full range of human needs.

From a digital perspective, a diversity of tools available is necessary. Clear training should be given on how to use technology, how to reserve spaces and how to ensure digital inclusivity, for instance when running hybrid meetings. Voice control technology and mobile app room pairing can also be helpful, as well as enabling close captioning. We also need to consider how 'tech-engaged' different groups are, and adapt to this.

What do organisations need to consider to create a more inclusive experience?

Figure 2: User interactions with the workplace experience

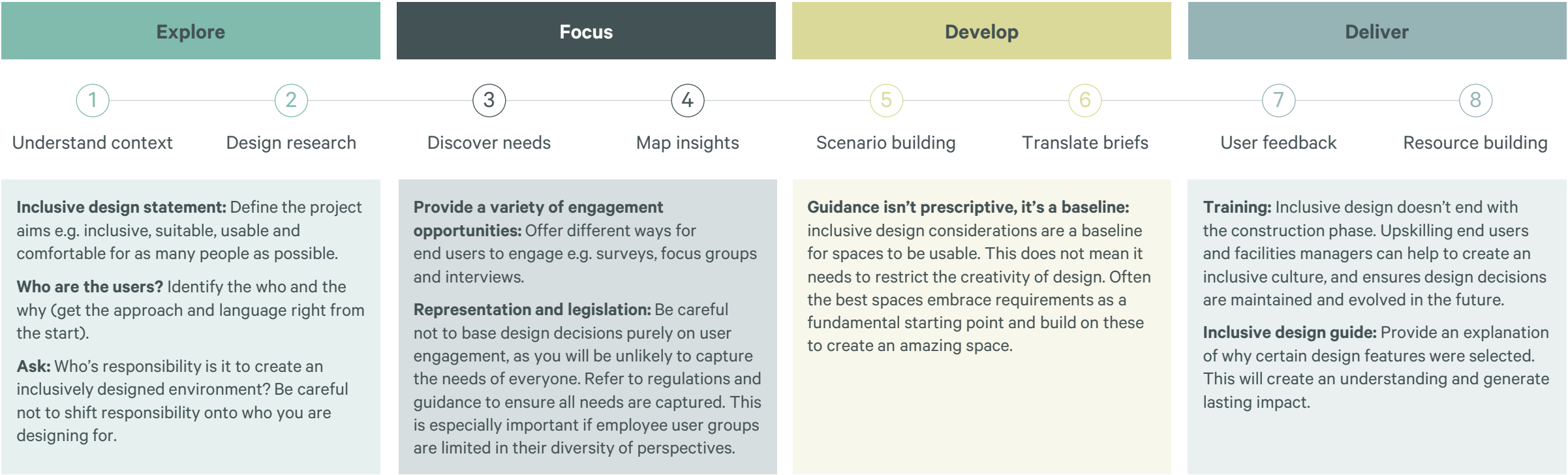


Source: CBRE Workplace Team 2022

03 — Opportunities to build ‘belonging’

Inclusive design is a way to create belonging, contributing to a positive cultural and mindset shift. By engaging with a diverse range of users (including employee network groups), maximising partnerships with local charities or hiring a consultant to advise on specialist design features, you will be far more likely to end up with a workplace that is ‘fit for purpose’ and usable for a diverse range of human needs.

For inclusive design principles to be incorporated, the process itself must also be inclusive. Here are some ideas to consider:



04 — Why is inclusive design essential to creating change?

Aside from being the right thing to do, inclusively designed environments can help to attract and support diverse teams. This means there are tangible benefits of building belonging within the workplace. These include:

Talent attraction and retention

An inclusive workplace is critical in attracting and retaining talent. According to a [recent survey](#), 83% of Gen Z candidates said that a company's commitment to diversity and inclusion is important when choosing an employer.

A [survey from Deloitte](#) found that almost two-thirds of respondents (Millennials & Gen Z) believed leaders only paid “lip service” to diversity and inclusion. Building an inclusively designed workplace is a tangible way that an organisation can promote their commitment to DE&I objectives and help drive behavioural change.

ESG reporting

[38% of Fortune 200 companies](#) include diversity and inclusion metrics in their ESG reporting. Inclusive workplace design can support CRE teams to meet their ESG goals by working with a [diverse range of suppliers](#) and contributing to the hiring and retaining of diverse talent.

Business benefit

The business case for inclusion is compelling. Research by [Accenture](#) shows that companies with improved inclusion of persons with disabilities were four times more likely to have shareholder returns that outperform competitors. According to [McKinsey](#), companies with greater ethnic, cultural and gender diversity were more likely to outperform their competitors.

Research also suggests that teams with neurodivergent professionals in some roles can be [30% more productive](#) than those without them.

Having a workplace that promotes inclusion, will enable all employees to feel welcome and perform at their best.

Innovation and performance

Inclusion is the cornerstone of innovation, and an [intentionally designed, innovative workplace](#) can help organisations to attract and retain top talent. An inclusive workplace design fosters diversity of thought, different approaches to work, innovation and creativity.

“There is little point in recruiting more diverse talent with a wider perspective and capacity for innovation if the workplace is not itself inclusive of their needs.”

Royal College of Art



05 — What's next?



Useful Resources



[Talking Inclusion with...](#)



[Designing for All: The next frontier of Inclusive Design \(WELL\)](#)



Having a clear process is fundamental to success and will ensure a diverse range of human needs are considered.

Incorporating inclusive design practices into CRE processes creates workplaces that enhance belonging and ensures projects have a lasting impact.

There is a strong business case for conscious inclusion throughout the real estate lifecycle, and CRE leaders should be challenged to think in this way.

Inclusive design doesn't just apply to the physical environment, it applies to the whole workplace experience.

Unlike for wellbeing and sustainability, there are limited certifications for inclusive design in the built environment, however the [WELL Equity standard](#) launched in November 2022. This is likely to increase awareness and accessibility of inclusive design.



To summarise, inclusive design can:

1. Create diverse and inclusive workplaces where everyone can thrive
2. Future-proof the workplace for any need that employees might develop throughout their working life
3. Bolster employee recruitment, retention and performance
4. Reduce risk of failure, and ultimately cost
5. Action DE&I and ESG goals



Contacts

Jennet Siebrits

Executive Director

Head of Research

jennet.siebrits@cbre.com

Kate Smith

Executive Director

Occupier Consulting

kate.smith@cbre.com

Lulu Yang

Senior Consultant

Occupier Consulting

lulu.yang1@cbre.com

Dhanishtha Patel

Senior Consultant

Occupier Consulting

ghanishtha.patel@cbre.com

Francesca Langton Kendall

Associate Director

UK Research Team

francesca.langtonkendall@cbre.com

Lucia Balmori-Jover

Senior Consultant

Occupier Consulting

lucia.balmorijover@cbre.com

Zoe Yakubu-Sam

Senior Consultant

Occupier Consulting

zoe.yakubu-sam@cbre.com

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