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Inclusion, accessibility and equity — from exhibition to fashion education

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The Victoria and Albert Museum's exhibition Design and Disability (June 2025–February 2026) is both humbling and thought-provoking. It demands participation, urging visitors to see design not simply as a matter of aesthetics or function, but as a vital tool for dignity, equity, and belonging. Far from being a passive display of objects, the exhibition creates an active dialogue, drawing audiences from observation into engagement, and ultimately inspiring them to rethink how design touches every life. What becomes quickly apparent is that this exhibition is not a niche concern, nor a special-interest showcase. It is a story about all of us. Design for Disability illuminates the hidden infrastructure of daily life, and once you begin to see it, you cannot unsee it. The way a bus stop is planned, the height of a counter, the logic of a keyboard, the ease with which someone enters a gallery space, these are not neutral or incidental choices, but decisions that determine who belongs, who participates, and who is left out. The exhibition quietly but insistently makes that case.

Spanning from the 1940s to today, Design and Disability demonstrate how persistence in the face of difficulty sparks innovation and representation. From self-made functional objects to refined industrial design and bold activism, the displays show that adaptation and creativity are not exceptions but essential human practices. In this way, the exhibition becomes a mirror, challenging us to confront our own biases and to reconsider how easily we take daily functionality and representation for granted. What is ordinary for some is a daily negotiation for others, and in that negotiation lies the spark of ingenuity. Accessibility is central to the exhibition, supported by tactile models, Braille, audio guides, video elements, and resting spaces. Its design underscores that accessibility can be both functional and beautiful. The spatial layout, paired with rich wall colours, from cool blue to warm orange to vibrant green, creates an atmosphere of inclusion and signals hope for a more equitable world. Nothing about the exhibition feels like an afterthought or a compromise. Instead, it quietly models the idea that accessibility enriches the experience for everyone, not only those who need it most.

Structured around the themes of visibility, tools, and living, the exhibition makes clear what is at stake: the lives of people who want to be seen beyond their disabilities, to be represented in society, fashion,

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Figure 1: Finnegan Shannon, 2018 – ongoing

and public life, seeking not only to fit in but also to shape their own culture. Each section builds upon the last, weaving a narrative of resilience and invention, while never allowing the visitor to retreat into sentimentality. Activism runs throughout, from protest flags and prints to the uncompromising slogan "Piss on Pity," insisting on capability, visibility, and voice. These slogans and artefacts refuse tokenism, instead demanding recognition. One of the most enlightening examples of lack of inclusions is the graphic called "School to Prison Line" (anonymous group of South London students), mimicking a London tube line that visualises how inaccessibility in education perpetuates exclusion from education, work, and society itself. Its stark clarity makes it instantly visible: accessibility is not a "nice-to-have," but a condition of equal participation. Fashion, too, is shown as both a mirror of culture and a tool of belonging. Adapted clothing and ingenious user-driven solutions reveal the long history of under-representation in the fashion industry. A line-up of unconventional mannequins, modelled on real people, wears outfits that express personality and preference, from everyday attire to carnival costume. These are not generic or standardised bodies, but bodies that tell stories, refusing invisibility. Other powerful moments of visibility include British Vogue's May 2023 issue, *Reframing Fashion*, printed in Braille, and covers featuring figures such as Sinéad Burke, whose organisation Tilting the Lens works toward a fairer and more accessible world.

Just as with clothing, ingenious solutions, adaptations, and hacks have been developed for tools to help overcome daily obstacles always with an insistence on being as self-reliant as possible. Many dedicated solutions could be for a much wider audience, such as the Zip Pull Dog Tag, which could support people of all ages, and the hands-free, self-closing Nike Go FlyEase shoes (2021). Here, the exhibition makes an argument for Universal Design[1] — design that begins with accessibility and equity but, in doing so, creates better solutions for everyone.

1. Ronald Mace, "Universal Design: Barrier Free Environments for Everyone," *Designers West*. Vol. 33, no.1 (1985):147–152.

Figure 2: Design and Disability, V&A

Figure 3: Sinéad Burke, British Vogue, Reframing FASHION, 2019

Figure 4: Zip-Pull-Dog-Tag, Jessica Ryan-Ndegwa, 2017

The exhibition goes on to explore disability-first perspectives and what it means to design for independent lives. People with disability are not waiting for permission; they are insisting on ways to claim space and participate fully in life and society. From protesting, to playing football for visually impaired athletes with a rattling ball, to feeling music through vibrations in a Woojer Vest (2020) at a Deaf Rave, the ingenuity and determination are both practical and joyful. There is a refusal of pity here, replaced instead by a celebration of creativity, skill, and culture. Crucially, the exhibition never slips into the language of charity or sacrifice. It presents people with disabilities not as problems to be solved but as agents of change, collaborators in the creation of a more equitable world. That framing matters deeply. By centring voices of people with disabilities, the V&A challenges stereotypes and disrupts the too-common narrative of disability as limitation. What comes across instead is possibility. Ultimately, the exhibition serves a dual purpose. For visitors with disability, it offers representation, empowerment, and visibility. For non-disabled visitors, it is profoundly educational, challenging unconscious biases while creating a safe space to listen, reflect, and be in awe of the persistence and creativity of lived experience. It leaves you reconsidering not only how objects are designed, but how societies are structured, and who those structures privilege or exclude. By placing Design and Disability alongside its historically celebrated shows on iconic designers such as Balenciaga, Dior, and Yamamoto, the V&A signals something crucial: that the creativity and ingenuity of people with disabilities is not marginal but central to the story of design. Disability is reframed not as a deficit but as a space of creativity, resilience, and innovation, an engine of cultural change that challenges us all to imagine a more inclusive future.

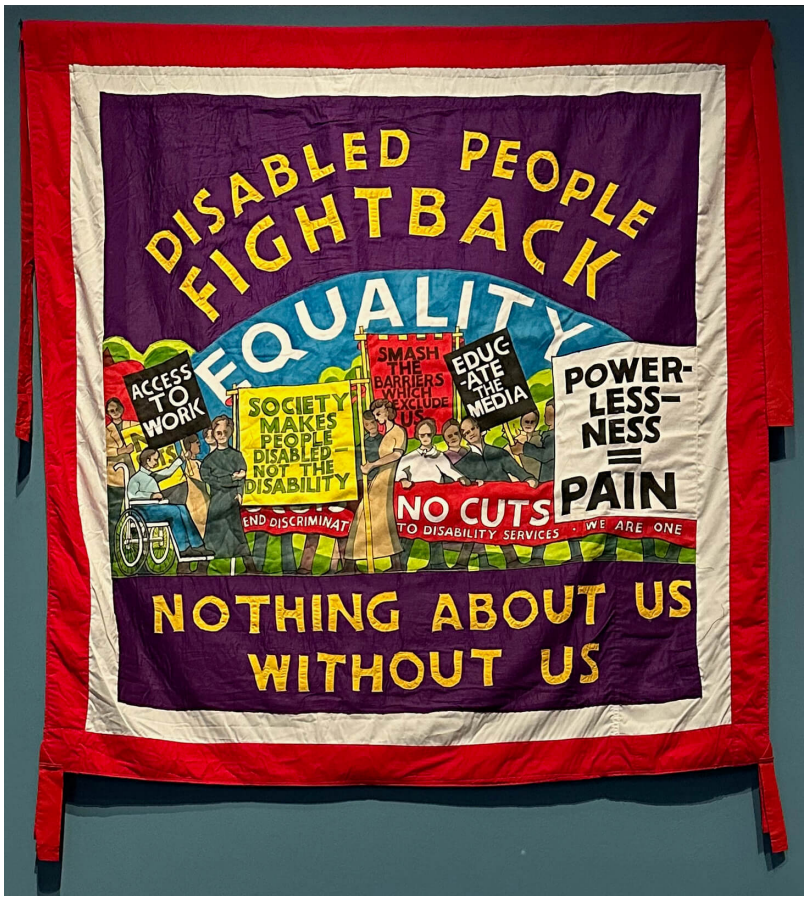

Figure 5: Disabled People Fight Back, Ed Hall in collaboration with disabled communities across north-west England, 2014–15

Fashion education

The exhibition at the V&A makes a strong case for inclusion through design, and its lessons resonate directly with fashion education. Fashion is one of the most visible forms of design, shaping identity, visibility, and belonging. Yet despite a growing focus on environmental sustainability in industry and in education, inclusivity and accessibility remain under-represented in both curricula and research. The broader fashion system illustrates the urgency of this shift. Mass production remains geared toward the industry's average body types and standardized sizes, leaving many needs unmet. There are inspiring exceptions of companies addressing diversity but inclusivity risks becoming a passing trend, much like size inclusivity, unless embedded systemically within education and industry. Initial research show that inclusion within fashion education is still rare. Fashion education still largely celebrates the designer as the all-knowing creator, working through personal artistic vision and trends. At Kolding School of Design, Denmark, sustainability has been researched and taught for more than twenty years, with a strong focus on environmental challenges. More recently, inclusion and diversity have been implemented in the fashion curriculum as part of a holistic framework based on the four pillars of sustainability: environmental, social, economic, and cultural. These interconnected pillars underscore that long-term well-being for people and the planet depends on balancing all dimensions, not just the environmental.

Existing methodologies such as *The Wardrobe Study*[2] and the FEA Consumer Needs Model[3] provide useful tools for understanding the user, however they primarily focus on designing *for* people rather than *with* or *as* people. These traditional and informative methods of data collection are unilateral: students learn about participants' needs and preferences, but participants are rarely introduced to the reasoning, methods, or theoretical underpinnings of the process. This creates an imbalance in which participants provide personal information without gaining agency or insight in return. While fashion education has slowly embraced environmental sustainability, the social dimension of sustainability — and the UN pledge to *Leave No One Behind* — remains under-addressed. To bridge this gap, fashion education could look to Universal Design (UD) as a value-based framework that was initially developed within architecture. The overall frame underlines a view on humanity and inclusion, and its seven principles are widely applicable, and three in particular — Equitable Use, Simple and Intuitive Use, and Tolerance of Error — might help secure equity and accessibility in co-design processes. Steinfeldt and Maisel's Goals of Universal Design — Body Fit, Comfort, Awareness, Understanding, Wellness, Social Integration, Personalization, and Cultural Appropriateness — further align with fashion education. Yet a goal such as Social Integration is often neglected in traditional fashion curricula and bringing it forward would enrich education and support more equitable practices. Many of today's most promising initiatives within inclusion and diversity in fashion have personal origins: Tommy Hilfiger's adaptive line was inspired by his daughter's autism, Sinéad Burke founded *Tilting the Lens* from her experience with dwarfism, and Victoria Jenkins launched *Unhidden* after becoming disabled in her twenties. These initiatives are powerful, but they point to the core of the problem in fashion design: inclusivity should not depend on personal experience alone but must be embedded structurally into education and industry practices.

This is where implementing UD can serve as the foundation for a systemic change. By insisting on a view on humanity and shifting fashion education toward co-design, equity, and accessibility, it becomes possible to empower persons with disabilities not only as wearers of fashion but as agents of innovation. Doing so will not only enrich curricula but also open the door to new, more inclusive business models that can reshape the fashion system.

2. Kate Fletcher and Ingun Grimstad Klepp (eds.), *Opening up the Wardrobe: A Methods Book* (Novus Press, 2017).

3. Jane M. Lamb and M. Jo Kallal, "A Conceptual Framework for Apparel Design," *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal*, Vol. 10, no.2 (1992): 42–47.

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