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New Agenda for Inclusive Design

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Editorial: New Agenda for Inclusive Design

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Abstract: The Inclusive Design Special Interest Group of the Design Research Society (InclusiveSIG - with Professor Hua Dong as its Convenor, and Dr Weining Ning as its co-convenor) organised the "New Agenda for Inclusive Design" Track for DRS2026. The Track has attracted more than 50 submissions from 16 countries. In total 19 papers were selected after blind peer-review, and three further papers added, forming four sessions: 1) Rethinking Inclusive Design; 2) Studying Older People: Theories and Methods; 3) Neurodivergent Groups: Adults and Children; 4) Assessing Accessibility and Inclusion. New agenda and trends include "relations as inclusion", "aesthetics as a driver for dignity", valuing older people's resources in design, and "predictable unpredictability" for neurodivergent groups.

Keywords: inclusive design; ageing population; neurodiversity; accessibility

1. Introduction

The InclusiveSIG's track "New Agenda for Inclusive Design" has attracted more than 50 submissions with a diverse range of topics. Through peer review (at least two independent reviewers, and sometimes three), we preliminarily accepted 20 papers (acceptance rate 38%). With one paper withdrawn in the revision stage, 19 papers were selected, plus three papers from the Open Track, in total 22 papers. We organised the papers under four main topics: Rethinking Inclusive Design; Studying Older People: Theories and Methods; Neurodivergent Groups: Adults and Children; Assessing Accessibility and Inclusion. Each topic is discussed below in a section.

The papers in this track point towards a new agenda for inclusive design in that they all grapple, in different ways, with the relationality and positionality of design researchers and those they worked with in the studies, including proposing new methods, sometimes through co-design and critical review of the methods themselves.

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2. Rethinking Inclusive Design

Several papers revisited the concept of “inclusive design”, “inclusion” and the role of designers and participants in the design process.

Iris van Hest, Eveline van Zeeland and Jörg Henseler’s paper “Inclusive design revisited: A paradigm of trustworthy connectedness” (van Hest et al., 2026) suggests that inclusion should be conceptualised as the facilitation of relational ties rather than individual participation. Traditional participatory methods tend to prioritise control and decision-making, risk silencing the very groups they aim to serve when the participants feel uncomfortable with power dynamics. Instead, inclusion is facilitated by the designers’ competence (e.g., transparency, reflexivity, and methodological skill) and warms (e.g., empathy, deep listening, and creating a sense of safety). It suggests moving from “inclusion through participation” to “inclusion alongside participation”, highlighting that genuine engagement often lies in the quality of the encounter rather than the final decision-making power.

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Expanding on the relational nature of inclusion, Zhixin Zhang, Sarah Kettley and Agnese Sile’s paper (Zhang et al., 2026) investigates the power dynamics within collaborations between designers and welfare communities in Japan. Through reflexive ethnography, the study identifies that inclusion is a relational process shaped by communication, emotion, and care. It highlights that while institutional hierarchies and emotional asymmetries can hinder participation, they also present opportunities for mutual learning. The findings emphasise that humour serves as a vital tool to defuse tension and bridge gaps in experience. The study argues that inclusion is not a stable state but a temporary accomplishment that must be continually maintained through a willingness to listen and adjust amidst uncertainty.

In the context of the domestic environment, Eloïse Ravet’s paper explores the home as a critical field for inclusive design, specifically focusing on the tension between assistance and autonomy for elderly inhabitants in France (Ravet, 2026). The research views design as a form of care that must respect an individual’s relationship with their objects and personal identity. It identifies "inhabitant-adjusters" who modify their own environments through strategies like displacement and adaptation to align objects with their lived experiences. The paper warns that objects designed solely for robustness (e.g., assistive objects/devices at home) can inadvertently reveal vulnerabilities rather than encouraging inhabitants to engage with or repair them.

Cultural and linguistic inclusion is addressed by Linli Zhang, Jinze Hao, Yaqi Wang and Liang Xiao, which examines transnational design classrooms bridging Chinese students and British curricula (Zhang et al., 2026). The study proposes the Inclusive Co-Learning Framework, which integrates linguistic scaffolding and cultural mediation. This multi-scalar approach moves inclusion to a dynamic, co-designed process involving micro-level interactions and macro-level institutional synchronisation. By fostering cultural reciprocity, the framework helps students navigate global curricula while respecting local learning realities.

Antje Burckhardt, Lenard Opeskin and Andrea Augsten focus on social inclusion within circular transitions, specifically looking at repair initiatives in Germany (Burckhardt et al., 2026). While these initiatives often aspire to be open to everyone, the study finds that inclusion is currently limited by factors such as age, class, and migration background.

Interestingly, inclusion in circular transition initiatives was primarily seen as a matter of volunteer recruitment rather than visitor participation. The research demonstrated that having a more diverse team—such as more women or people with migration backgrounds—significantly improves outreach to those specific groups.

Finally, the paper of Anna-Sara Fagerholm, Henrik Haller, Anders Warell and Per-Olof Hedvall explores how aesthetics can drive inclusion in everyday urban infrastructures, such as municipal recycling rooms in Sweden (Fagerholm et al., 2026). The paper identifies three dimensions: access aesthetics (ensuring dignity), communicative aesthetics (clarity of information), and spatial aesthetics (fostering safety and belonging). Environments that are neglected or smelly tend to exclude residents, whereas those designed with aesthetic consideration foster shared responsibility. This research positions aesthetics not as an external layer, but as an essential element of how social inclusion and dignity are expressed in the built environment.

The discourse surrounding inclusive design is undergoing a transformation, shifting from a focus on physical accessibility and inclusion to a deeper exploration of relational processes, emotional engagement, and cultural reciprocity.

3. Studying Older People: Theories and Methods

Research into the ageing population has been a key theme of inclusive design. The theories are moving away from "deficit-oriented" models toward those that recognise the agency, resources, and emotional complexities of older adults.

3.1 Theories and Principles

Yumei Dong, Hua Dong, Tingting Wang and Richard H. M. Goossens introduce the Diamond Model of Resources, developed through interviews with Dutch seniors (Dong et al., 2026). This model categorises twelve resource types across six dimensions: practical, emotional, intellectual, social, cultural, and time. The implication of design for healthy ageing is that by adopting a resource-based mindset, designers can develop solutions that promote active participation and healthy ageing, externalising the potential of older people to solve both personal and societal problems.

Lay Xuan Estherine Goh and Cees de Bont's paper explores the transition from technology compliance to co-design among the "young-old" cohort in Singapore (Goh & de Bont, 2026). While this group demonstrates reasonable digital literacy due to prior experience, there remains a significant opportunity to enhance their digital empowerment. This study underscores the need to move beyond simply ensuring access toward fostering meaningful digital participation.

Managing health in later life is a focus of the paper by Zhuoning Fu, Emilene Zitkus, Sharon Cook and Luke Harmer, which examines how design supports older adults living with multimorbidity (Fu et al., 2026). The research identifies four key principles for health technology design: reducing complexity, supporting everyday expertise, embedding prioritisation, and allowing variable engagement. The paper argues that participatory design is a "methodological imperative" in healthcare, as older adults must be viewed as co-interpreters of their own complex health management needs rather than just passive users.

3.2 Methods and Toolkits

Chuxuan Xu, Hua Dong, Mohammed Elsouri and Mingfeng Wang address the difficulty older adults face when expressing abstract emotional needs regarding unfamiliar technologies like companion robots (Xu et al., 2026). To solve this, the researchers developed a visual co-design toolkit consisting of companionship cards, robot role cards, and recording canvases. This toolkit has changed the conditions for reflection, enabling participants to transform lived emotional experiences into grounded design insights. It also facilitates deeper dialogue and helps designers understand how companionship is specifically imagined and experienced in later life.

Lian Pan, Xiao Wei and Yuanyuan Yin's paper investigates the potential for Virtual Reality (VR) to enhance digital engagement among adults aged 60+ in the UK (Pan et al., 2026). Through participatory workshops, the study found that while seniors have a strong interest in VR for social and cultural engagement, they are often hindered by systemic design issues. These include high cognitive loads from multi-step operations, challenges with dual-hand coordination, and insufficient feedback. The research concludes that older users are not incapable of using immersive technology; rather, the technology itself requires an age-inclusive perspective to remove these barriers.

4. Neurodivergent Groups: Adults and Children

Involving neurodivergent groups is being discussed more in recent years, suggesting the importance of sensory-informed design and the active participation of these groups in shaping more inclusive environments and tools.

In their paper, Asako Osedo and Stella Boess explore how indoor environments, such as schools and workplaces, can support the diversity of communities by eliciting the preferences of autistic adults in Japan and the Netherlands (Osedo & Boess, 2026). The study challenges traditional "deficit-oriented" approaches that focus solely on minimising sensory stressors. Instead, it highlights the desire for "predictable unpredictability"—spaces that are vibrant and engageable for social interaction while still offering opportunities for rest. It suggests that a "Co-Creatable Indoor Environment" must balance functional predictability with autonomous adaptability.

Focusing on adults with ADHD, Patrick Brundell, Emily Thorn, Teresa Castle-Green, Paul Tennent, Juan Avila Martinez and Sachiyo Ito-Jaeger details the co-design of co-design workshops themselves in Nottingham (Brundell et al., 2026). The research utilises Soma design, which centres bodily experience and sensory engagement as valid sources of insight. The study provides facilitation guidelines, emphasising that safety is essential and that flexibility in facilitation allows the environment itself to become a tool for inclusion. Moving between different physical spaces during workshops was found to create informal encounters that deeper reflection.

For children with ADHD, Ningfeng Tang, Yang Yin, Haoran Wei, Beijia Hu, Chunlei Chai and Xiyuan Zhang presents MetaTrain, a gamified executive function training programme based on a metacognitive framework (Tang et al., 2026). Conducted at Zhejiang University in China, the study found that training with metacognitive strategies significantly improved children's

working memory and inhibition control. This research provides a practical framework for integrating theoretical metacognition into the design of intervention games.

Shanhao Fang, Han Yu and Xiang Yuan' paper examines the emotional design of AI educational robots for children with autism (Fang et al., 2026). Applying a three-level emotional design model (instinctive, behavioural, and reflective), the study found that multimodal elements like slower speech, warm colours, and positive expressions significantly improve engagement and trust. The research establishes a hierarchical structure for evaluation based on perceptual adaptation and emotional resonance.

5. Assessing Accessibility and Inclusion

Accessibility and inclusion are importance measurements of inclusive design. Several papers focus on the methodologies and systems used to evaluate and implement inclusive practices in both physical and digital spaces.

Kyulim Kim, Injeong Kim, Yujin Bae and Younjoon Lee's paper investigates the transfer signage system in the Seoul Subway Network, specifically for persons with reduced mobility (Kim et al., 2026). Using the "Preview–Decision–Reassurance" concept, the research offers principles for signage design at key decision points to create a barrier-free wayfinding system. The study involved researchers following participants with head-mounted cameras to document behavioural notes and post-movement interviews, creating a model that benefits not just wheelchair users but also elders and tourists.

In the realm of digital education, Nicole Lotz, Derek Jones and Tina Deiml-Seibt's paper examines the "fuzzy edges" of online design studios in the UK (Lotz et al., 2026). The study identifies ten core studio values—including respect, care, and joy—and maps them to Universal Design for Learning (UDL) guidelines. It advocates for online studio spaces that support diverse identities through flexible participation and "serendipitous interactions," suggesting that inclusive practices emerge when learners are empowered to shape their own environments.

Mutong Rao and Jody Watts's study explored using of diverse AI tools to support accessibility. It firstly used Generative AI (e.g., ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot) to create visually accessible interfaces. Then, using a "Research through Design" methodology, the researchers developed a 14-point cross-standard accessibility scoring system based on WCAG 2.2 and other guidelines. The findings indicate that while AI can respond to structured prompts, its competence in executing fully accessible interfaces is currently low, often producing structural and detail errors (Rao & Watts, 2026). The paper suggests positioning AI as an assistive tool rather than an autonomous designer.

Lastly, Emilene Zitkus, Leonardo Morgadona Tosi Rodrigues, Vinicius Dantas, Leticia Santos, Patricia Campos, Ana Laura Oliveira, Rikarla Sales, Lucas Vieira and Sheila Andreoli's paper discusses the development of a mobile application for hearing screening in Brazil, involving older adults as a "critical group" in the design process (Zitkus et al., 2026). The research identified a need for simplified language, graphical cues, and images. Crucially, the study found that for those with low digital skills, an inclusive solution must include in-person support at primary health care units, i.e., designing for inclusivity requires considering alternatives beyond the digital medium.

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6. Additional Papers for Stimulating Discussion

In organising the four sessions for the InclusiveSIG Track (see Figure 1), we selected a few papers from the Open Track, e.g. Shuzhong Wang's paper "An Early-Stage Framework: Exploring Narrative and Co-design Methods in the Social Care Decision-Making Process for Older People" (Wang, 2026) for our "Studying Older People" session; Jakob Clemen Lavrsen's paper "Design Methods as Cognitive Tools: Understanding Method Usage through Cognitive Theories" (Lavrsen, 2026) for our "Neurodivergent Groups" session, and Jiawei Li, Jiayue Wang, Lin Zhu, Jiaxuan Xu, Changran Zhao, Zhiyong Fu's paper "Bodystorming through Disruption: AI-assisted Design Improvisation Pedagogy" (Li et al., 2026) for our "Assessing Accessibly and Inclusion" session. We believe these papers will help bring a broader perspective and stimulate discussions.

7. Conclusions

The papers selected for the InclusiveSIG 2026 Track suggests a trend towards new interpretations of inclusion, e.g., "relations as inclusion", "trustworthy connectedness", "aesthetics as a driver for dignity", and "predictable unpredictability" for neurodivergent groups.

There is an increase in the number of papers focusing on neurodivergent groups, both adults and children, highlighting a sensory-aware design. Furthermore, the methodologies employed—ranging from Soma design to visual co-design toolkits and reflexive ethnography—demonstrate a commitment to amplifying marginalised voices through inclusive, creative and embodied practices.

The geographical diversity of these studies is significant, featuring insights from Europe (e.g., UK, Germany, Sweden, France, Netherlands), Asia (e.g., China, South Korea, Singapore, Japan), and South America (e.g., Brazil). In the submission, there were papers from Australia,

Türkiye, India and USA. However, it is important to acknowledge the absence of papers from e.g., Africa, which suggests that further outreach of the InclusiveSIG and global perspectives are needed in the future.

Finally, the prevalence of the use of AI tools is evident, both as a subject of study (e.g., assessing AI-generated interfaces' accessibility), as a tool for intervention (e.g., AI robots), and as a tool for improving communication (e.g., grammar checking). The observation from the review suggests the influence of these tools may contribute to a certain lack of diversity in how methods and findings are articulated, potentially "standardising" the language used, almost making them "predictable" – creating "a style for all". As the field moves forward, it will be essential to ensure that the AI tools do not inadvertently 'flatten' the very diversity inclusive design seeks to support.

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Google Gemini was used to polish English in some paragraphs. The corresponding authors retain oversight, editing and accountability of the editorial. No substantial information from any selected papers was 'fed' to GenAI. Many reviewers have helped review the papers, and we thank all the reviewers.

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