

Travel Without Barriers: The Power of Co-Design in Accessibility

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As enshrined in Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, **“Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person,”**

However, for people living with disabilities, **accessing transportation can be a daily struggle, preventing them from fully realizing these fundamental rights.** Accessible transport isn’t simply about adding ramps or wheelchair spaces as an afterthought—it requires a complete overhaul in how we design these systems from the outset.

Through conversation with [Pete Donnelly](#), [TED x Speaker](#) and founder of The [Wheelchair Skills College](#) and [George Marcar](#) MBE - Driver Policy Implementation

Manager | Bus Operations at Transport for London (TfL), we explore the growing role of ‘co-design’— the practice of involving people with lived experience in the design process and highlight how **it’s not just an ethical approach, but a practical and essential method to make transport more inclusive for all.**



The Importance of Lived Experience in Co-Design

Transportation systems are often designed without fully considering the diverse needs of people with disabilities, leading to inaccessible environments that are costly to fix. By including people with lived experience of disability from the beginning, we can avoid this and create systems that work for everyone.

As Pete Donnelly explains, “People who deal with barriers in current systems are best placed to advise on what good accessibility looks like for future design. It is critical that including people with lived experience is planned and budgeted for throughout the design process. Not doing so will create inaccessible systems and lead to higher costs for adapting to accessibility in the future.”

Investing in accessibility from the start is not only more cost-effective but also a necessary step toward ensuring the independence and autonomy of people with disabilities. This early involvement prevents the need for costly retrofitting and allows individuals living with a disability to participate in society equally with others.

Innovations in Accessible Travel

Across the world, various transportation systems are leading the way in accessibility, demonstrating what co-design can achieve. One innovative example that Pete shared with us comes from **Japan, where an escalator allows wheelchair users to move in an upright position** by levelling several steps. This kind of innovation would not have been possible without the input from people with lived experience of mobility challenges.

📺 An Accessible Escalator in Japan - www.accessible-japan.com

This type of practical thinking highlights the potential of co-design to revolutionise how we all think about transportation and accessibility. By using the insights of those who encounter barriers every day, we can move beyond 'box ticking' - providing the basics, and create solutions that genuinely work for all travellers.

TfL's Evolving Approach to Accessibility

Closer to home, Transport for London (TfL) has made significant strides in making their services more accessible. George Marcar MBE, Driver Policy Implementation Manager at TfL, outlines some of the improvements that have been made in recent years and explains how TfL engages with its customers living with disabilities throughout their design processes.

"Bus design has continued to evolve from the introduction of the first low-floor buses thirty years ago (in 1994) to colours, textures, on-bus ramp design, and the space allocated to mobility aid users. In the past two years alone, there have been many significant changes; we have consulted with stakeholders representing people with cognitive conditions/disabilities, which has informed the design of flooring, seat fabric, lighting and colours used on London's buses. For example, the use of **'coffee shop' flooring instead of dark lino which is especially helpful to people with cognitive conditions.**"



Another example shared by George was of a particularly innovative feature, the use of different coloured materials on 'priority' seats or other visual cues to help highlight

them for those who need to be seated as well as the largest possible space on the bus to accommodate mobility aids, buggies and upstands.

Additionally, new information displays on buses now provide detailed information about the next three to four stops, making travel more predictable. George also emphasised that these changes are not made in isolation, “For me, **the most important elements are communication and collaboration and essential to our ongoing strategy**. All of our improved features have been developed following consultation with stakeholders representing older and disabled people, and we continue to have regular conversations as other initiatives and opportunities develop.”

<https://youtu.be/VJxVXcmNuBA>

A Future Built on Co-Design

As cities and transportation systems continue to evolve, transport providers are looking at staff training, on bus notices, bus lighting and notification systems to enhance accessibility across our networks.

Future improvements to transport systems must address the diverse needs of all passengers ensuring that accessibility is built into the foundations of new systems, rather than being added as an afterthought.

As a society it's essential that we ensure that people with lived experiences of disability are at the heart of these conversations, not just as a matter of ethics, but of practical necessity. By continuing to engage with communities that are living with disabilities and by making co-design the standard practice, we can create environments where everyone can travel freely and independently.

To find out more about Co-design and the variety of Innovative Methods we use, email grainne@neighbourlylab.com