



What is Disability Justice?

"You rarely change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."¹

- Buckminster Fuller, Architect

A section of the Perkins&Will Disability Inclusion series

Note: Color choices have been reviewed for accessibility and this document uses alt text. The document's font, Atkinson Hyperlegible, was chosen due to its demonstrated increased accessibility for readers.

Why Should You Care?

While the passage of the ADA sought to bring a standard of equitable access, **Disability Justice strives to understand the root cause of inequity that leads to spaces being unjust.**

As of April 2025, the US federal government no longer enforces disparate-impact discrimination protections. **The lack of federal enforcement for disparate-impact discrimination protections makes it more difficult to federally enforce disability-related civil rights legislation, such as the ADA.**

When the impetus is placed on legislative mandates to set standards, a minimum level of compliance becomes acceptable. This perpetuates disability exclusion.

At Perkins&Will, we actively design beyond minimal accessibility standards. We recognize that providing base level access does not equate to providing inclusion or equity. Designing fair, equitable spaces means proactively identifying and addressing existing barriers.

Centering Disability Justice as a foundational value system can lead to creating spaces that promote empathy and equity in our communities, regardless of federal enforcement or acknowledgement.

What is the Difference?

Disability Rights

Disability rights work within prevailing systems and structures of society to use existing, specific laws to fight for equality. At times, **these efforts can be based on a single-issue identity, focusing exclusively on disability at the expense of other identity intersections** (such as, race, gender, sexuality, age, immigration status, religion, etc.). Often, disability rights focus on people with mobility impairments, marginalizing other types of disability and/or impairment.

Disability Justice

Coined by the revolutionary, people of color with disabilities Patricia Berne and Leroy Moore of Sins Invalid, **Disability Justice re-imagines new, alternative ways to achieve disability equity for our communities.** It allows for more authentic collaboration and more powerful results. Marginalized groups become the center of decision making to create an intersectional guiding framework. **Disability Justice builds on the approach from the disability rights movement by taking a more comprehensive, intersectional approach to securing rights for people with disabilities.**

To achieve a design practice rooted in Disability Justice, we must understand our own internalized and external ableism - as well as systemic ableism - and move forward with a clear pathway of understanding and unlearning. **You do not have to have a disability to experience ableism.** Read some tips from our "How To Design Like An Anti-Ableist" within our document "[Normative Design and Ableism](#)"³.

"Rights-based strategies often address the symptoms of inequity but not the root. The root of disability oppression is ableism and we must work to understand it, combat it, and create alternative practices rooted in justice."²

— Sins Invalid

Key Terms & Definitions



Image credit: Tight Control: Human Rights in Neon Lights, an exhibit by disabled artist and activist Zoe Partington.⁴

Positionality

The context that creates your identity. This can be in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status, etc. Positionality describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of - and outlook on - the world. It also helps you recognize how your identity influences the way you see the world.

Intersectionality

A lens that reveals how different aspects of identity meet, overlap, and interact — shaping where power is held, where barriers appear, and how discrimination and privilege are experienced.

De-Centering

Deliberate acts, practices, processes, and rituals that shift the center of power.

“How do we learn to do this love work of collective care that lifts us instead of abandons us, that grapples with all the deep ways in which care is complicated?”⁵

- Leah Lakshmi
Piepzna-Samarasinha

The 10 Principles of Disability Justice

Below is a simplified, condensed version of the "10 Principles of Disability Justice" by Sins Invalid.⁶

1. Intersectionality

Our lived experiences are nuanced and shape our perspectives of the world.

2. Leadership of Those Most Impacted

By **centering the leadership of those most impacted**, we keep ourselves grounded in real-world problems and find creative strategies for resistance to injustice.

3. Anti-Capitalist Politic

Our worth is not dependent on what and how much we can produce and we resist conforming to solely capitalist levels of productivity. Capitalism depends on wealth accumulation of some, at the expense of others, and encourages competition as a means of survival.

4. Commitment to Cross-Movement

Disability Justice lends itself to politics of alliance, shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism.

5. Recognizing Wholeness

People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. **Each person is full of history and life experience.**

6. Sustainability

We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.

7. Commitment to Cross-Disability Solidarity

We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that **isolation undermines collective liberation.**

8. Interdependence

We meet each others' needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that **state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.**

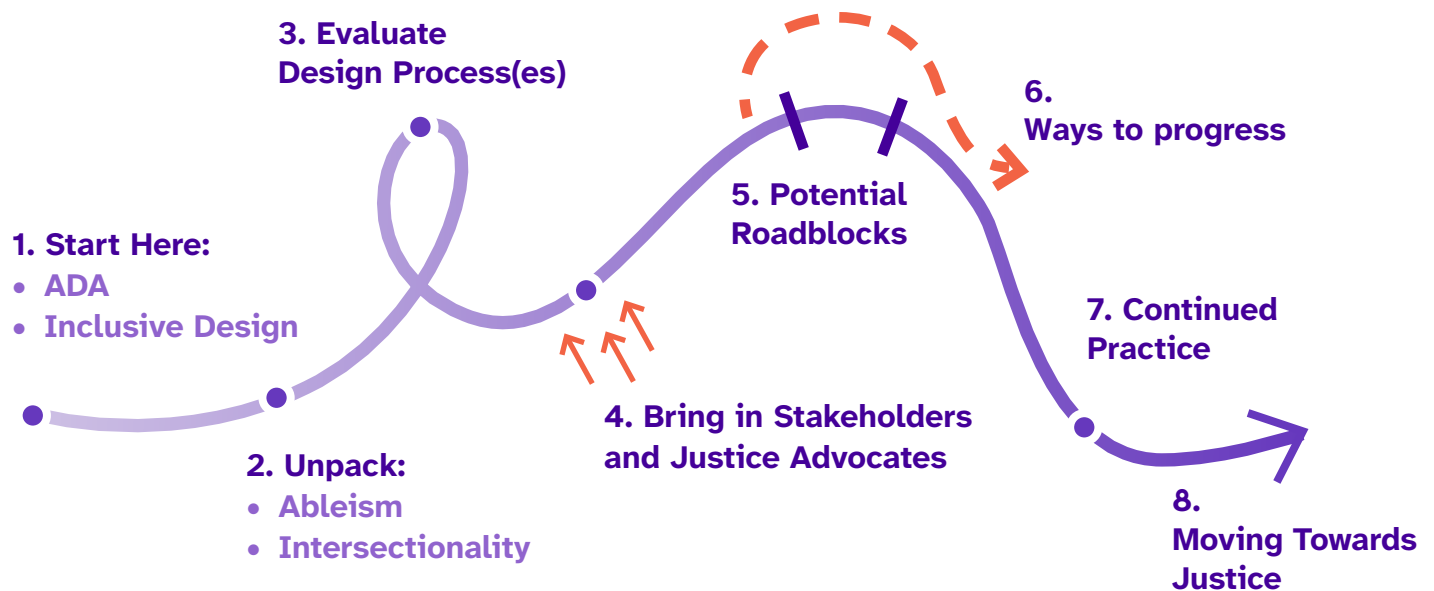
9. Collective Access

Access needs aren't shameful - we all function differently depending on context and environment. Access needs can be articulated and met privately, through a collective, or in community, depending upon an individual's needs, desires, and the capacity of the group.

10. Collective Liberation

No body or mind can be left behind - only moving together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

The Design of Disability Justice



Designing for Disability Justice is not a linear process. There are several steps, each of which can iterate on itself and others as designs progress.

Step 1: Start! Investigate both accessibility and inclusive design opportunities.

Step 2: Unpack! Understand biases and identities of the design team and potential users. Investigate ableism and intersectionality.

Step 3: Evaluate Design Process(es)! Examine how the design comes together. What is missing? What should be further explored?

Step 4: Bring in Stakeholders and Justice Advocates! Re-evaluate design team assumptions.

Step 5: Potential Roadblocks! There will be (un)anticipated roadblocks. Mentally prepare for this inevitability.

Step 6: Ways to Progress! Find ways to move around the roadblocks, to continue the goal of Disability Justice. You may have to start again with another strategy.

Step 7: Continued Practice! Take what you learn and continue to bring those ideas into future projects.

Step 8: Moving Towards Justice! Delight in the progress your project achieves. Imagine how much more Disability Justice can happen!

Key Takeaways

Designing for Disability Justice means making considerate, systemic changes to both our internal processes and external outputs, ensuring these are aligned within a framework for Disability Justice. We must begin this work by **acknowledging our own biases, actively combatting ableism, and applying an introspective lens to all we do**. Consider the following questions that we can ask ourselves, our colleagues, and our consultants at all stages of the design process.

Disability Justice is not a checklist to complete during project kick-off or at the end of a design phase when reporting to third parties. Disability Justice must be learned and actively applied, to unlearn ableism, empower voices of the marginalized, and re-imagine current systems that cause harm.

Questions to Consider:

- Were stakeholders with disabilities included in the design process?
- Could this project be co-designed with, and center the needs of, individuals with disabilities and other marginalized people?
- Does the design challenge or support the transformation of systems that aid, alienate, and/or perpetuate harm to marginalized communities?
- How can our project or process promote interdependence for individuals with disabilities?
- Are we willing and able to review our own internal design process to be anti-ableist (project management, delivery methods, deadlines, presentation accommodations)?
- Are we working with allied professionals who understand and apply our values towards sustainability and collective access?
- Aside from adhering to the ADA, were additional inclusive design strategies considered in programming and space planning?
- Were concepts such as lighting and aural justice proposed when working with consultants?⁷

Dig Deeper

Check out these resources to learn more!



- **Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha**

"A collection of essays centering the lives of sick and disabled queer, trans, Black, and brown people, with knowledge and gifts for all."



- **Sins Invalid**

"A disability justice-based movement building and performance project that celebrates disabled people, centering and led by disabled Black, Indigenous, and people of the global majority, and queer, trans, and nonbinary disabled people."

Authors' Note

This document is primarily US-centric. This is in part due to the authors' lived experience and knowledge base. We acknowledge that disability inclusion is a global issue, and hope that this work can be expanded upon and applied from an international perspective.

We welcome feedback! If you have any questions or insights to add, or you are interested in learning more, please reach out to the author: **Chelsea Jackson-Greene** (Interior Designer, Perkins&Will).

Special Thanks to our Internal Contributors: Bri Dazio, Danielle Baez, Kate Dailey, Erika Eitland, Samuel Orlando, Larissa Sattler, Jacob Williams.

In addition, we want to honor the rooted and invaluable feedback from our Community Insight Partners: Nicholette Driggs, Disability Advocates; Whitney Hill, SPORK! Director; Francisco Lasta, OTR/L, Assoc. AIA, Inclusive Design Lead, GFT; Alison Rheame, MS, Accessibility Specialist. It was critical that we collaborate directly with the perspectives of members of the disability and advocate community.

How to cite: Jackson-Greene, C, and Dazio, B. (2026) What is Disability Justice? Perkins&Will, PRECEDE: Disability Inclusion Initiative. www.precede.perkinswill.com.

Endnotes

- 1 Popular paraphrase of the philosophies in Buckminster Fuller's 1981 book, "Critical Path".
London, England. 1980s.
- 2 sinsinvalid.org
- 3 Dailey, K. (2025) Normative Design & Ableism. Perkins&Will, PRECEDE: Disability Inclusion Initiative. www.precede.perkinswill.com.
- 4 @Tight Control: Human Rights in Neon Lights exhibit by Zoe Partington.
- 5 Piepzna-Samarasinha, L. Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018, Vancouver.
- 6 Sins Invalid. (2019). Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Movement is Our People (2nd ed.). Berkeley, CA.
- 7 While we do not have the space to delve into these concepts within this document, we highly encourage readers to look into the concepts surrounding lighting and aural justice!

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