

# Discussing accessibility and design from a disability studies perspective – the politics of ‘universality’

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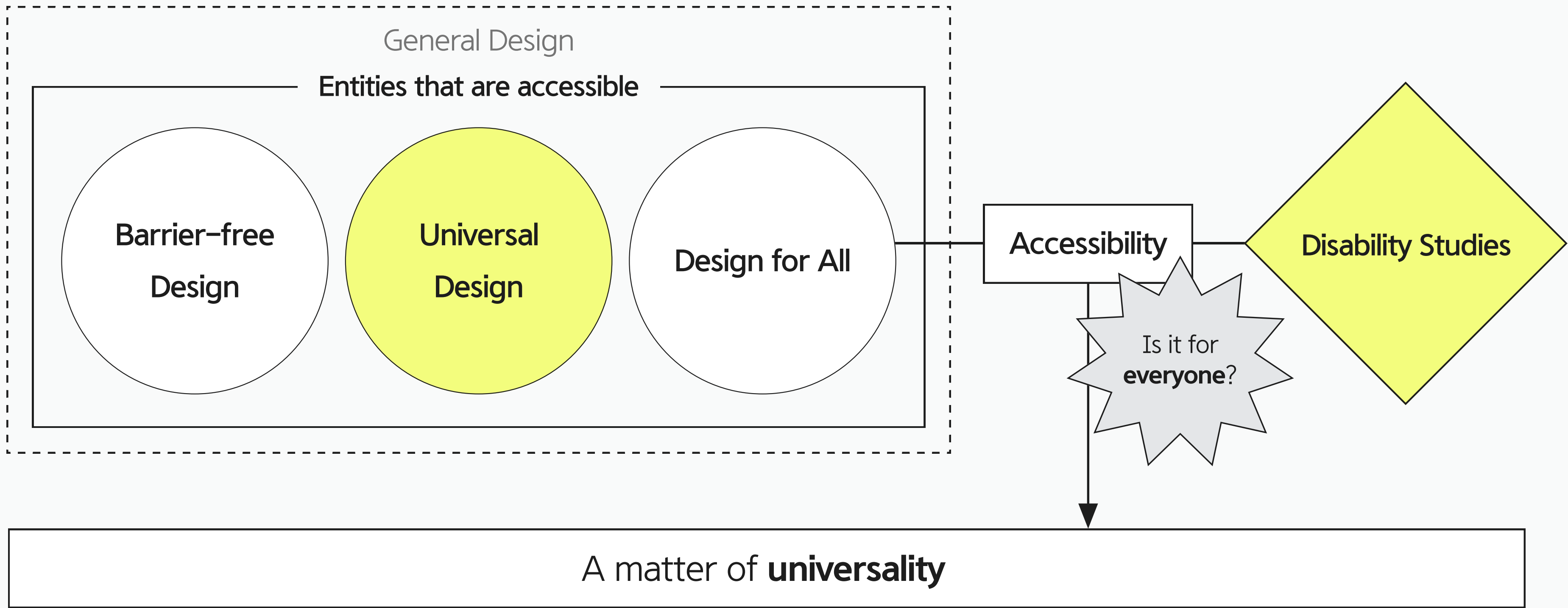


## 1. Introduction

### – Ethical Design and Disability Studies

Through an analysis of the relationship between disability studies and a series of 'ethical designs' such as universal, barrier-free, and design for all, this study aims to examine the terrain of 'accessibility' and design discourse, and to raise the need to look at the question of 'universality' more critically and reflectively.

While ideological and practical efforts to ensure that the benefits of design outcomes are for the benefit of all continue to this day, there is a need to more reflectively examine the concepts of 'universality', 'inclusion', and 'everyone' to better illuminate the reality that efforts to emphasize this ethic of design are limited to some areas, mainly the public. This study aims to explore the limits of these issues through a disability studies approach.



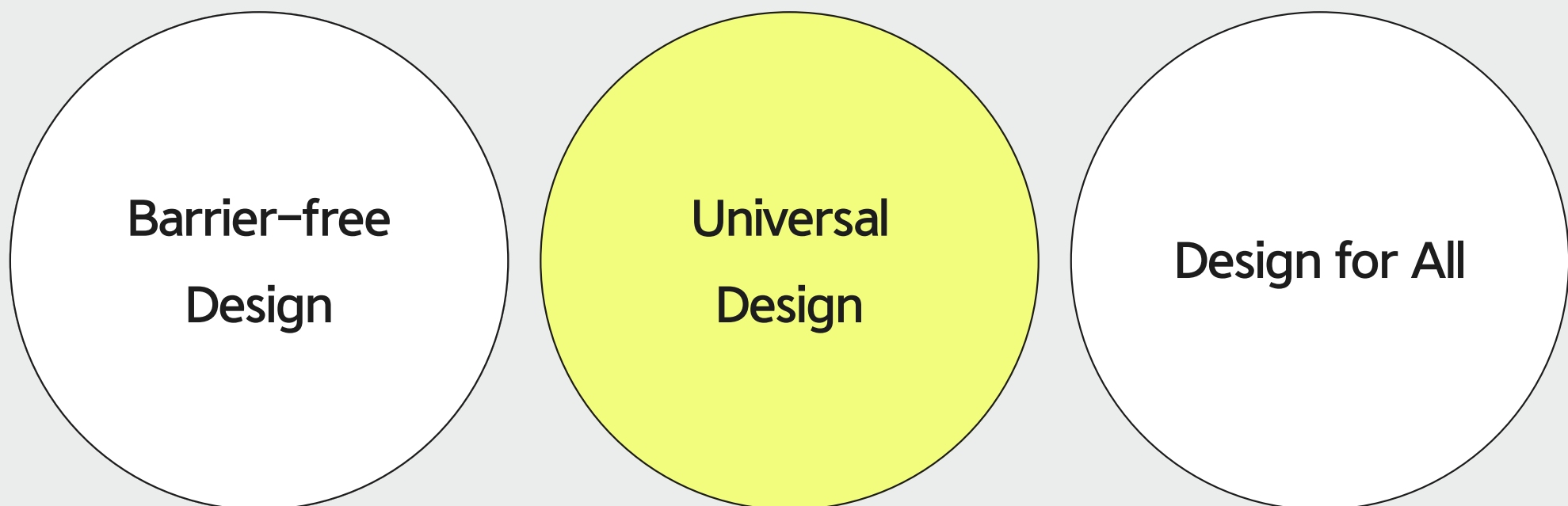
## 2. The History of Inclusive Design

### Barrier-free Design

The history of addressing accessibility in design issues can be illustrated through barrier-free design. Barrier-free design stems from the history of the American disability movement after World War II by veterans, wartime workers, and others who opposed the view of disability as a personal tragedy. The active engagement of design in accessibility issues led to the recognition that design is not value-neutral and passive, but actively conditions users and shapes their lives.

### Universal Design

Universal design is a term proposed by American architect Ronald L. Mace in 1985 to describe a concept that goes beyond barrier-free. According to Mace, universal design is "a way of designing a building or facility at little or no additional cost to make it attractive and functional for all people, regardless of disability.



"Designing for everyone is possible"

By including people who are often excluded from design considerations, we can ultimately create designs that function better for everyone.

## 3. The Disability Studies Perspective

Disability studies grew out of the 1975 protests against segregation and the social model of disability, which views disability as a social construct rather than a medical impairment and a problem to be solved by the individual. For example, if a wheelchair cannot climb a flight of stairs, it is not because the wheelchair user is disabled, but because the stairs and surrounding environment are not designed to accommodate the wheelchair, and because society is structured around non-disabled people.

Disability is a combination of ability, meaning "want of power, strength, or ability," and 'dis' It refers to the inability to do something. , meaning inability or inability to do. However, according to legal philosopher Martha Nussbaum, the concept of ability is "the sum total of opportunities to choose and act in a particular political, social, and economic environment" and is always transindividual. Disability is a matter of discriminatory and unequal relationships, and disability studies addresses the relationships in which a being is disabled. In the design world, disability studies questions the concept of the human being, the user, usability, and the "normality" of the standard body.



"Designing for everyone is impossible"

Design will always benefit some and disadvantage others. The possibility of universal design emerges when we acknowledge that universality can never be fully realized.

## 4. Issues overlooked by the design field

Who and to what extent do terms like "universal," "inclusive," and "for all" refer to in design? There is room to explore whether the positioning of values-based design, including universal design and inclusive design, is consistent with their underlying intentions. Universal and inclusive design are not immune from criticism for simplifying the complexity of real-world problems and depoliticizing reality, reducing them to the level of good deeds like good design.

To address this, the design for marginalized people approach reinforces inequalities in the design process by relying on the favorable attitudes of designers without questioning the user's category of "normalcy". This attitude, often seen in 'design for people with disabilities', runs the risk of reproducing power relations in the design process by fixating on people with disabilities as the ones who should benefit from the design, or as the ones who have input at one stage of the design process. Importantly, without challenging the assumption that design is a force for good for all, it is difficult to break out of the existing structures that create problems.

## 5. Conclusion – Who does "everyone" include?

In conclusion, barrier-free design, universal design, and design for all have limitations that make it easy to slip into the simple slogan of "good for all" without recognizing the the power relations embedded in the design process. Universal design has become increasingly disconnected from real-world problems and has come to mean an idealized state or guideline, and unlike the 1970s, when it worked closely with the disability movement, it now has an unbridgeable gap with disability studies. We need to rethink the criticisms and reflections that inclusive design has become a specific area in the Korean design community, a temporary and partial part of many design events, mainly implemented by public institutions.

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