Inclusive Design

CASE STUDIES:

① Officer Specialist School by Kart Projects
② SDA Housing Project by Studio Bright
③ Special Needs Dental Clinic by SPH Architecture and Interiors



An inclusive design approach at Officer Specialist School has resulted in a series of distinctly non-institutional spaces. Photographer: Leo Showell.

Inclusive design must be about more than just meeting a baseline. Recent specialist projects demonstrate how prioritising warmth and dignity over clinical functionality can lead to richer, more generous architecture for all.

IT HAS BEEN FIVE YEARS SINCE THE 2021 UPDATES to *Australian Standard 1428.1 Design for access and mobility* were introduced. Historically, the standard has focused predominantly on the physical dimensions of accessibility: the widths, gradients, clearances, circulation spaces and other measurable requirements that enable people with disability to access and move through buildings.

The 2021 update broadened this approach to include some visual and operational aspects of accessibility. Requirements around luminance contrast between building elements, for example, recognise that the legibility of an environment can be as important as the physical ability to move through it. This represents an important expansion in how accessibility is understood within the standard, acknowledging that our experience of buildings is not purely physical. However, *AS 1428.1* remains fundamentally a technical document, concerned with establishing measurable minimum requirements rather than defining the wider experience of a space.

This distinction is important. The standard's self-professed objective is to "provide building designers and users (architects, property owners and regulators) with the minimum design requirements for new building work to enable access for people with disabilities." As one of the principal accessibility references available to architects, it establishes a necessary baseline; it should not, however, define the ambition of accessible design.

There is a growing awareness that accessibility encompasses far more than physical access alone. How easily a building can be understood and navigated, its acoustic and sensory qualities, the familiarity of its spaces, and the degree of choice and control afforded to its users, can all influence how accessible it is. These qualities are harder to prescribe through a universal standard because they are often specific to people, place and circumstance.

This broader understanding also challenges the institutional approaches that have historically characterised environments designed specifically for people with disability. Specialist schools, healthcare environments and supported housing have often been distinguished through clinical materials, standardised layouts and visibly functional responses to accessibility. Increasingly, designers are drawing instead on qualities associated with domestic and civic architecture: familiarity, warmth, natural light, acoustic comfort, landscape and intuitive wayfinding.

Working beyond the baseline is not necessarily straightforward. Different physical, sensory and cognitive needs can require different – and sometimes competing – responses, negotiated alongside budget, regulation, maintenance and operational requirements. This places greater importance on consultation and engagement, and on recognising people with lived experience as active participants in the design process.

Perhaps tellingly, some of the most considered examples of this approach continue to emerge within specialist environments, where the needs of people with disability are explicit within the brief. While these projects demonstrate progress, their specialist nature also raises a broader question: if qualities such as legibility, sensory comfort, familiarity, dignity and choice produce better environments for people with disability, why shouldn't they inform architecture more broadly? Currently, it often falls to advocates, clients and designers to push beyond the baseline. What happens when we view designing for accessibility as more than a box-ticking exercise or issue of compliance?

This year has seen the completion of several projects across different scales and typologies that take this approach, seeing accessibility and difference as an opportunity rather than a constraint within the design process. Each demonstrates a generosity that extends beyond compliance. Through familiar scales, domestic references, sensory consideration and greater user agency, these projects create environments that feel welcoming rather than institutional. They illustrate that when accessibility is embraced as a design proposition rather than a technical obligation, it can become a catalyst for richer, more generous outcomes, offering lessons that extend well beyond their specialist settings.

②

SDA Housing Project by Studio Bright

COUNTRY
Wurundjeri
LOCATION
Naarm/Melbourne, Vic
SITE AREA
700 m²
PROJECT SIZE
360 m²
CLIENT
Disability Homes Victoria
END USER NEEDS
Individuals with significant intellectual disabilities and complex support needs
POST-OCCUPANCY EVALUATION
Ongoing

THE SDA HOUSING PROJECT offers another exemplar project which goes beyond fulfilling a baseline spatial and functional brief and treats each requirement as a design opportunity.

Completed for Disability Homes Victoria, the project provides Specialist Disability Accommodation (SDA) under the NDIS Robust category for residents with significant disabilities or complex behaviours. Conceived as a pilot project, it set out to demonstrate how thoughtful design could improve quality of life for residents while simultaneously reducing maintenance and operational costs. Central to the proposition was a rejection of the hospital-like precedents that have traditionally defined this housing typology, where restrictive practices have too often been relied upon to manage complex behaviours.

The project comprises two L-shaped units with carer's accommodation positioned between them. The building sits neatly within the scale and context of its residential street, with a heavy sloping roof resting on a curving brick base. The plan allows each unit a connection to a generous private courtyard, ensuring every room maintains a visual connection to the outdoors – an important consideration for residents who spend much of their time at home. Each dwelling also provides multiple exit points, with every room offering more than one means of egress, to support the safety and wellbeing of both residents and staff.

Acoustic performance is carefully considered at the scale of both the room and the site. Sound attenuation

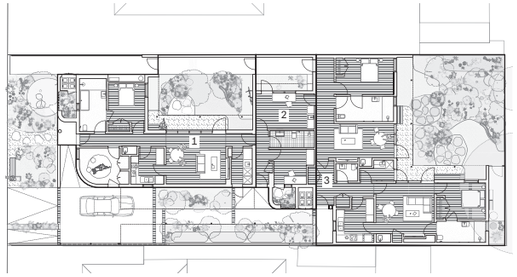


The building adapts neatly to the scale and context of its residential street.



Rooms throughout both units maintain visual connections to outdoor spaces.

1 Unit 1
2 Onsite overnight assistance
3 Unit 2



Floor plan
1:500



Residences are designed to feel intentionally domestic, countering hospital-like precedents for this housing typology.

between neighbouring properties, as well as within the dwellings themselves, reduces sensory triggers for residents while also minimising noise impacts on the surrounding community. The interiors are robust yet warm, with acoustic panelling incorporated into high-level surfaces, contributing to a gentler sensory experience.

Particular attention is given to the bathrooms, recognising that these often become important secondary sensory spaces and centres of routine. Each is given its own distinctive colour palette, creating spaces with a clear identity rather than the clinical appearance typically associated with the settings. Services are carefully concealed, a strategy that not only improves durability but also reinforces the domestic character of the interiors. The project negotiates a complex web of regulatory, operational and behavioural requirements with remarkable care and clarity.

PROJECT CREDITS

ARCHITECT Studio Bright / **PROJECT TEAM** Mel Bright, Robert Hillman, Tara Moore, Grace Upton Jones, Maryna Popova / **BUILDER** Markovski Built / **LANDSCAPE** Emergent Studios / **ENGINEER** Meyer Consulting / **PHOTOGRAPHER** Gavin Green



Acoustic panelling in high-level surfaces softens acoustics and atmosphere.



Close attention to bathrooms acknowledges their importance as sensory spaces and centres of routine.