



# Social Responsibility Through Design

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The true basis of Universal Design is not “one product for everyone.” It is about treating people equally.

Design can be a powerful force in our lives and have significant social impact. Every design project we undertake will result in products, environments, interfaces, or services that will ultimately have an effect on people’s lives. Universal Design is a fundamental consideration. On a day-to-day basis, as a design project is conducted, we must follow a belief that great design considers the needs of people on the edges of what is traditionally considered the “mainstream.” Design should not systematically exclude people who have physical or cognitive challenges, or cultural or gender differences, simply because the design team did not consider these variables in their work.

Whether people have long-term or short-term physical limitations, are growing older and experiencing challenges commonly encountered with aging, or simply are not thinking clearly, products can fail people for many reasons. Solving for the edges of the population curve requires that the design team embrace a socially responsible approach at the very beginning of a design project.

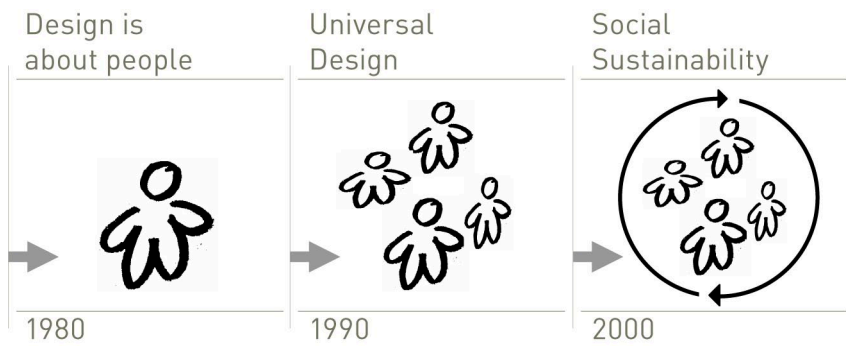
## The Role of Segregation

Smart Design’s approach to Universal Design is based on a single principle: Eliminate segregation in design.

Segregation is defined as a social system that requires separate facilities for minority groups. While typically attributed to separation by race, ethnicity or social class, in our work it has direct ties to Universal Design. Segregation is a strong word in the United States, and certainly a factor affecting the radical youth culture that developed in the United States in the 1960’s. In the early 1980’s when we were first exploring the topic of Universal Design, our goal was a simple, single principal: Eliminate segregation by designing to include everyone.

## Design is about People

Our office was started in 1980 by a small group of industrial designers, most of whom had been in college together. Children of the 1960’s, our goal was to use design to make lives better for people. Smart Design began with a number of ideals based on the principle that design should be focused on the end user. The ideals were fueled by a number of successes we had in the 1980’s. In 1990 we helped pioneer the concept of Universal Design when four



**[Figure 1]**

Smart Design was formed in the early 1980's with the idea that design is about people. While our commitment to Universal Design continues, our goal has expanded to include many issues concerning social responsibility through design.

designers from Smart — Davin Stowell, Tucker Viemeister, Michael Callahan and Dan Formosa (the author of this paper) — designed the original line of OXO GoodGrips kitchen tools. The line accommodated as many people as possible, including people with challenges such as arthritis and poor vision. This venture was a significant risk at the time. While our previous products more quietly accommodated wide ranges of ability, with this project we directly expressed a point of view that design should accommodate everyone. The OXO GoodGrips line of products has become highly successful, and often emulated. As of today, Smart Design has responsibly developed over 700 products for OXO. The company has grown exponentially as a result. Design work for our other clients has been approached with this same point of view. Our approach was similarly applied to the products we designed for companies such as Johnson & Johnson, Corning Glass Works, HP, and others.

### Social Sustainability

Today our mission is evolving to include many topics under a wider heading of "Social Sustainability." This includes our commitment to universal design, and looks beyond that to include many aspects of design that work to improve quality of life globally. These include social, cultural, family and gender issues. Design, for instance, has historically been a male-dominated field. We are exploring where, how, and to what extent females in the consumer market have been made to adapt to male points of view. Consumer

electronics, for example, are often developed from a male perspective and logic, to which females often must conform. Taking a step further back, female designers often need to adapt to male methods of thinking and working in the development of products and services. At Smart Design we are exploring unique design methods that originate from a female point of view. These methods are resulting in products more naturally suited to female's physical, cognitive, and emotional needs.

Sensitivity to various cultural needs is also a component of social sustainability. As products and services developed in one country are placed into markets around the world, it is part of our responsibility to ensure that they are not forced to fit. The creation of a unified world, while simultaneously respecting cultural diversity, presents a challenge to all designers and manufacturers. Ethnographic fieldwork, along with quantitative methods we developed that point to similarities and differences in attitudes and perceptions among people worldwide, provide us with an in-depth understanding. Also of benefit is the fact that our staff at Smart Design consists of people from approximately 20 countries, a deliberate effort to add personal insight as we account for cultural needs and differences in our design work.

This movement brings socially responsible design to every product that we create for the many Fortune 100 companies with which we work. Consumer products that only target healthy 18 to 34 year olds can certainly exclude, unnecessarily, a large number of people. An added benefit, of course, is that our ability to accommodate a wide range of people translates to a larger potential market and increase in sales. Unless all groups can be treated equally, specific portions of the population will be unhappily excluded.

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