

Designing for Our Future Selves: A Case Study in Age-Inclusive Design Education Through a Reflective Workshop

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Abstract

As the global population ages, the design field faces an urgent imperative to confront ageism and foster more inclusive practices. Yet age-inclusive design remains underrepresented in both education and professional settings—often treated as a niche concern rather than a universal human experience. This case study presents a two-part intervention that seeks to reframe aging as a creative, joyful, and necessary focus of design practice: the Design for Aging Resources website and a national workshop titled Designing for Our Future Selves. Together, these initiatives equip design practitioners and educators to address age-related bias, explore the intersection of accessibility and aesthetics, and engage in imaginative futures thinking. The online resource hub curates over 100 tools, frameworks, and case studies to support age-inclusive and values-driven design, while the interactive workshop guides participants through reflective and speculative exercises using tools such as the Radar Diagram and Futures Cone. This work demonstrates how participatory methods and evidence-informed frameworks can surface hidden assumptions, shift mindsets, and generate design responses grounded in empathy, dignity, and autonomy. In doing so, it offers a replicable model for integrating gerontological knowledge into design education and practice—inviting designers to envision aging not as someone else's issue, but as a shared and vital dimension of our collective future.

Keywords: Age-Inclusive Design, Ageism in Design, Design Education, Design for Aging, Participatory Design Methods, Futures Thinking/Speculative Design, Accessibility and Aesthetics

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As the global population ages, the urgency to address ageism and improve inclusivity in design has become increasingly clear. In the United States alone, adults aged 65 and older will outnumber children for the first time in history by 2030 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Despite this shift, age-inclusive design remains underrepresented in design education and professional practice, often overshadowed by assumptions that aging is a niche or specialized concern rather than a universal experience. Design that fails to consider the needs, capabilities, and aspirations of older adults contributes to widespread inaccessibility, perpetuates harmful stereotypes, and compromises community well-being.

Although co-design with older adults is an essential and widely supported practice, it is not always immediately feasible, particularly in early-stage design settings or classrooms with limited access to older populations. In such instances, reflective tools can offer a powerful first step. Designers must begin by examining their own assumptions and imagining aging not as someone else's experience, but as part of their own future. This internal work helps surface bias, reframe expectations, and foster a sense of agency. Reframing aging as a personal and collective future, rather than a distant or "othered" demographic, creates space for more empathetic, equitable, and imaginative design responses.

This case study introduces a facilitated workshop titled *Designing for Our Future Selves*, aimed at addressing these gaps in both educational and professional contexts. The goal of the futures thinking workshop was to engage design practitioners and educators in confronting age-related bias, exploring the intersections of accessibility and aesthetics, and imagining more joyful, inclusive futures not only for others, but also for their own aging experiences.

Background and Literature Review

A growing body of research in gerontology has emphasized how age-related changes in vision, mobility, cognition, and social context affect older adults' interactions with the built environment and

designed systems (Norman, 2013; Lansbury, 2020). Despite this, most design education fails to integrate such knowledge, resulting in a disconnect between design practice and the lived realities of aging. Aging is too often viewed as a problem to be solved rather than a shared experience to be understood and supported. Consequently, older adults are frequently excluded from design processes or considered only through narrow, medicalized frameworks.

While inclusive and participatory approaches are increasingly emphasized, age-inclusive design is still often treated as an afterthought in educational and professional contexts. Scholars such as Kat Holmes in *Mismatch* argue that accessible design should be foundational, not retrofitted, benefiting not just older adults but people of all ages and abilities. Design that prioritizes accessibility from the outset leads to broader usability, reduces stigma, and enhances belonging. Yet, as Holmes (2018) emphasizes, accessibility is too often equated with minimum compliance rather than understood as a catalyst for innovation and empathy. In this context, reflective practices become essential: they allow designers to interrogate their assumptions and uncover the biases embedded in design decisions that marginalize aging populations.

To address this gap, the following workshop was developed to blend speculative and participatory tools (*Figure 1*). Drawing on service design, inclusive design pedagogy, and strategic foresight, it treats aging not as a niche consideration, but as a design imperative, and the future as a space we can intentionally shape (Candy & Dunagan, 2017; Voros, 2003).

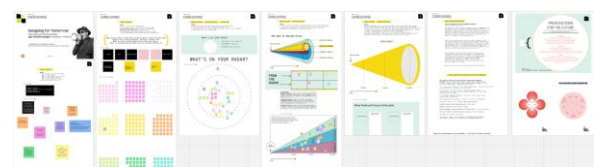


Figure 1 *Design for our Future Selves Workshop Overview*

Reframing Aging in Design Education

This workshop and reflective intervention contributes to a growing body of scholarship in age-inclusive design and participatory futures education. While co-design with older adults is widely recommended and essential in many contexts (Baskerville & Prendeville, 2021; Sanders & Stappers, 2008), there are critical moments when practitioners and educators must first examine their own positionality and age-related biases before entering co-creative spaces. This reframing, *designing for our future selves*, serves as a vital foundation to any ethical and inclusive design practice addressing aging.

In many cases, logistical, ethical, or institutional barriers may make direct co-design with older adults infeasible, particularly in short-term workshops or early-stage educational experiences. Rather than forgo engagement altogether, this approach offers an alternate entry point, one that centers empathy-building, critical reflection, and the reframing of aging as a universal, not marginal, design concern. Structured exercises like the Bull's Eye (Radar) Diagram and Futures Cone (Voros, 2003) offer accessible, high-impact opportunities for designers to challenge assumptions, visualize aging more expansively, and develop future-focused narratives rooted in joy, autonomy, and inclusion.

The adaptability of these tools also makes them suitable for a wide range of professional and community contexts. In classrooms, they can support intergenerational understanding and foster reflective practice. In healthcare, policy, or nonprofit settings, they can uncover assumptions about aging embedded in systems or services. And within design teams, they offer a method for aligning on shared values and long-term vision before solution development begins.

Importantly, by combining speculative and participatory methods with evidence-informed tools, this model demonstrates that age-inclusive design is not only about accessibility or functional needs, but also about cultural change. Before we can design with, we must be willing to ask how we

currently design *without* older adults in mind, and what stories, systems, and tools we need to change that.

Workshop Overview

The 120-minute virtual workshop, hosted during a national AIGA event, welcomed over 220 participants aged 23–60, including educators, art directors, graphic designers, and motion designers. Four facilitators led themed breakout groups: Health and Wellbeing, Transportation and Mobility, Entertainment and Social Connectedness, and Caregiving. These themes were selected because they represent key areas where design intersects with the lived experience of aging and where age-related bias, exclusion, or opportunity frequently surface. Each theme provided a distinct lens for exploring how systems, environments, and relationships can either support or inhibit well-being as we age. These categories reflect well-established domains of age-related experience identified in aging research and design literature, including health systems, mobility, social participation, and caregiving (Leitão & Silva, 2022; Lansbury, 2020).

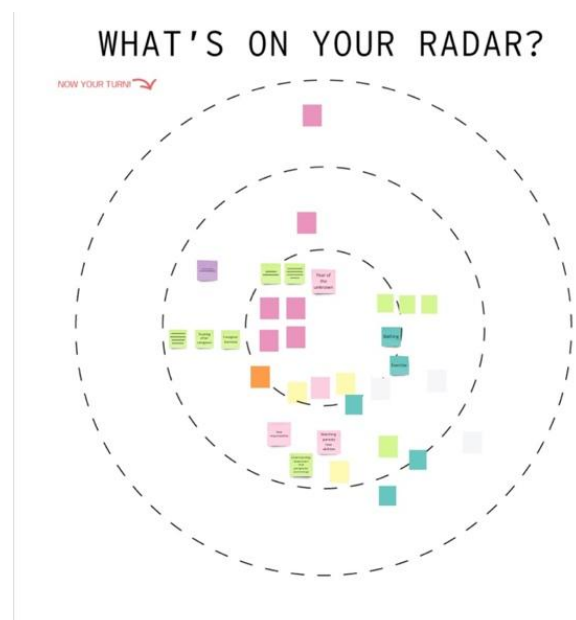


Figure 2 *Design for our Future Selves Caregiving Radar Responses*

One facilitator opened the session by laying the groundwork with a discussion of age bias and how it shapes design. Participants began by reflecting independently. They wrote down everything that came to mind regarding their assigned theme: fears, assumptions, hopes, and existing products or services. These ideas were then placed into a radar diagram (Figures 2-5) that allowed each participant to prioritize the significance of each insight. In groups, they discussed their individual radars and selected the top three ideas to move forward.



Figure 3 *Design for our Future Selves Mobility + Transportation Radar responses*

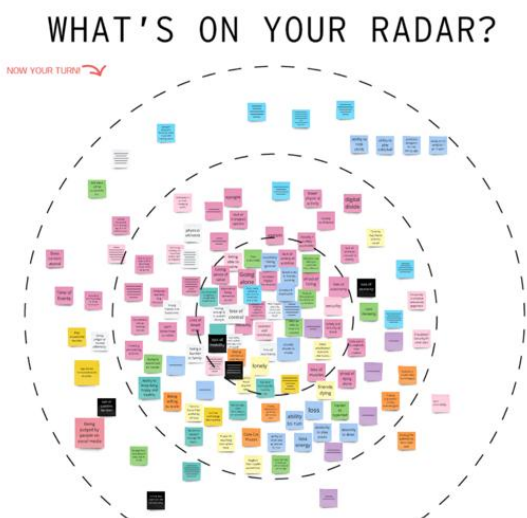


Figure 4 *Design for our Future Selves Entertainment + Connection Radar responses*



Figure 5 *Design for our Future Selves Entertainment + Connection Radar responses close-up*

Next, the groups used the Futures Cone to imagine possible, probable, and preferable futures (Figures 6-8) based on those ideas.

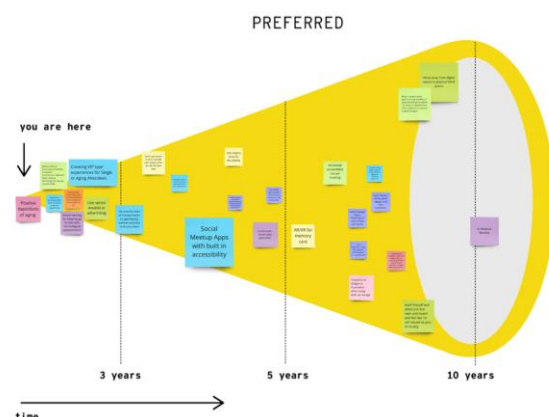


Figure 6 *Design for our Future Selves Entertainment + Connection Futures Cone responses*



Figure 7 *Design for our Future Selves Entertainment + Connection Futures Cone Vote response*

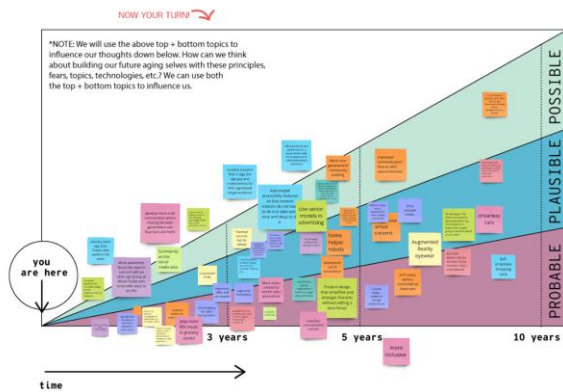


Figure 8 *Design for our Future Selves Entertainment + Connection Futures Cone* responses from the vote from topics in Figure 7

From these, they collaboratively built a vision of their preferred future. The Futures Cone encouraged participants to reframe aging as a dynamic, creative process. In Caregiving, “autonomy for both caregiver and care recipient” emerged as a top concern; in Entertainment, participants envisioned intergenerational gaming and age-friendly public spaces.

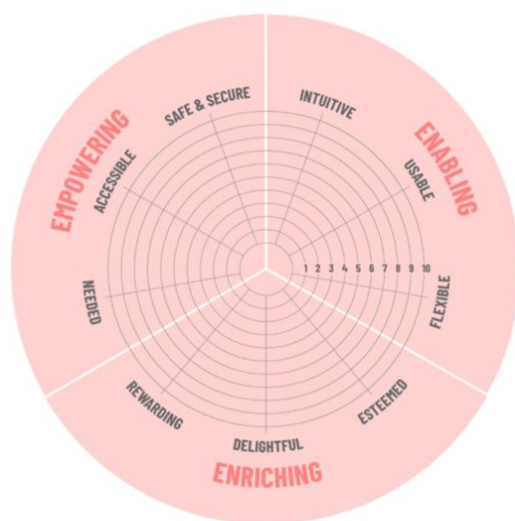


Figure 9 *Age-Inclusive Design Evaluation Tool* from the Design Age Institute

While the Age-Inclusive Design Evaluation Tool and Hamlyn Cloverleaf (Figures 9 & 10), both developed by the Design Age Institute at the Royal College of Art, were not used live, they were shared after the session. The Age-Inclusive Design Evaluation Tool helps assess how well a product or service supports dignity, autonomy, and

adaptability for older adults. The Hamlyn Cloverleaf prompts designers to consider People, Place, Purpose, and Process, offering a broader systems-level lens for age-inclusive innovation.

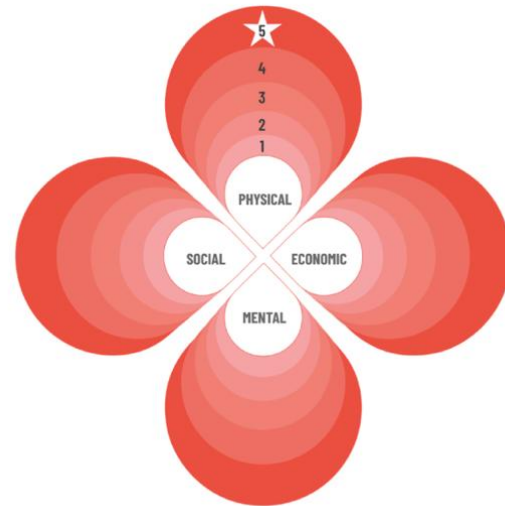


Figure 10 *Hamlyn Cloverleaf Tool* from the Design Age Institute

Methodology and Assessment

The workshop followed a structured qualitative approach grounded in speculative design and reflective practice. Data were collected in real time using Miro, a digital collaboration platform, where participants contributed written reflections, ideation post-its, and diagrams within each breakout group. Facilitators captured observational notes and synthesized group discussions, identifying emergent themes. This methodological triangulation, gathering both direct participant input and facilitator interpretation, ensured that both stated and implicit insights were captured.

Prompts were designed to elicit a range of responses from individual, interpersonal, and societal perspectives. These included hopes and fears around aging, personal assumptions, and values most relevant to the assigned theme. Common themes included automation anxiety, interdependence, clinical aesthetics, and joyful aging. Participants were encouraged to identify existing design assumptions and imagine alternative futures that prioritized dignity, connection, and autonomy.

Workshop Results

Participant responses suggested that the experience extended beyond technical accessibility, engaging deeper questions about purpose and well-being in later life. One participant shared, “I thought I’d be learning tips about accessible typography. Instead, I was rethinking what I want my later life to feel like—and how design can help or hurt that.” Others voiced concerns about aging in a world shaped by automation and clinical aesthetics, emphasizing the desire for emotionally resonant, human-centered experiences. For instance, in the Caregiving group, participants explored a future in which AI tools supported, but never replaced, human empathy in care scenarios. In the Transportation group, participants questioned assumptions about older adults’ mobility and envisioned future systems that prioritized independence and community connection. These comments helped facilitators trace not just thematic patterns, but also value shifts, from accessibility as functionality to accessibility as dignity and delight.

Participant feedback highlighted how the experience helped reframe aging as personal and value-driven. Instead of focusing solely on functional or aesthetic improvements, many participants expressed a deeper awareness of what they wanted aging to feel like. Themes such as dignity, autonomy, belonging, and joy were commonly named as essential to their envisioned futures.

For example, participants in the Caregiving group voiced concern about the emotional toll of caregiving and emphasized the need for mutual autonomy between caregiver and care recipient. Those in the Entertainment and Social Connectedness group highlighted the importance of maintaining play, connection, and relevance as they aged. Across groups, frustration with existing aging-related products, especially those with clinical, stigmatizing aesthetics, surfaced repeatedly.

Participants also shared that the radar tool and Futures Cone helped surface previously unspoken fears and hopes, with some noting how

rarely they had been invited to think about aging from a proactive, creative perspective. The workshop enabled honest reflection and dialogue about how values like independence, community, and empathy could be centered in future design work.

Challenges and Adaptability

In many settings, particularly classrooms or early-phase projects, direct co-design with older adults may not be feasible due to logistical, ethical, or institutional constraints. This workshop offers an alternative entry point. By inviting participants to imagine their own aging and reflect on age-related values, it simulates a kind of proxy co-design—building empathy by placing oneself in the shoes of future users.

Facilitating large online groups and balancing tool introduction with depth were among the key challenges. Additionally, some participants were unfamiliar with Miro, which required additional orientation and support. Templates and follow-up resources supported clarity. Flexibility was essential, especially with varying experience levels in futures thinking.

Implications for Practice

While the curated Design for Aging Resources website (Figures 11 & 12) was not the focus of the workshop, it served as an optional follow-up tool, offering over 100 age-inclusive resources including toolkits, case studies, and research frameworks. This online archive, used in academic and professional settings, extends the workshop’s reach and provides a centralized, joyful, and accessible hub for continued learning and implementation.



Figure 11 *Design for Aging Resources Homepage*

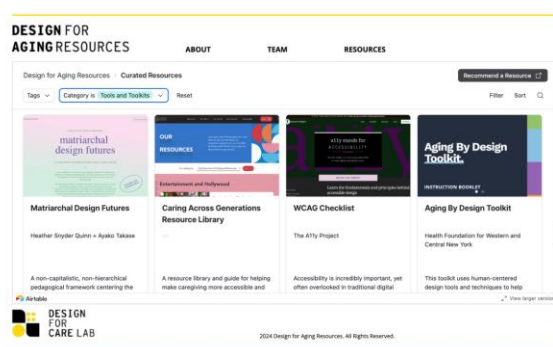


Figure 12 *Design for Aging Resources Resource page*

This workshop illustrates how inclusive design can begin with cultural and emotional reflection. By inviting participants to explore their own assumptions and hopes about aging, the format fosters greater empathy and value alignment. Grounded in inclusive pedagogies and co-design literature (Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Candy & Dunagan, 2017), the experience supports expansive thinking about equity, accessibility, and identity in later life. Its speculative orientation, focusing on the futures participants wish to inhabit, helps shift design away from reactive problem-solving and toward more creative, intentional, and human-centered outcomes.

Conclusion

Designing for Our Future Selves offers a replicable model for addressing age bias and embedding empathy into design practice. It shows that reframing aging as a shared journey, rather than a distant or marginalized condition, can open

the door to more human-centered and joyful design futures.

By inviting designers to confront their own biases and imagine the lives they want to lead, the workshop makes aging personal, and designing for it, necessary. In doing so, it opens new pathways for inclusive futures rooted in dignity, creativity, and belonging—futures we can begin building today.

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Kimberly Mitchell is an Assistant Professor of Graphic Design and the James Johnson Dudley Faculty Scholar at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She leads the Design for Care Lab, where her research bridges design and gerontology to create inclusive, joyful experiences for our future selves. Her work includes interdisciplinary collaborations in health, aging, and care design, and centers on Design for Aging Resources, a curated hub for design practitioners and educators. Nationally and internationally recognized through Design Incubation, AHFE, ISSIP, and GDUSA, her workshops, toolkits, and research advance age-inclusive design that empowers individuals and communities across the lifespan.