

USER CENTRED DESIGN

Find out what's below the surface of a cool design

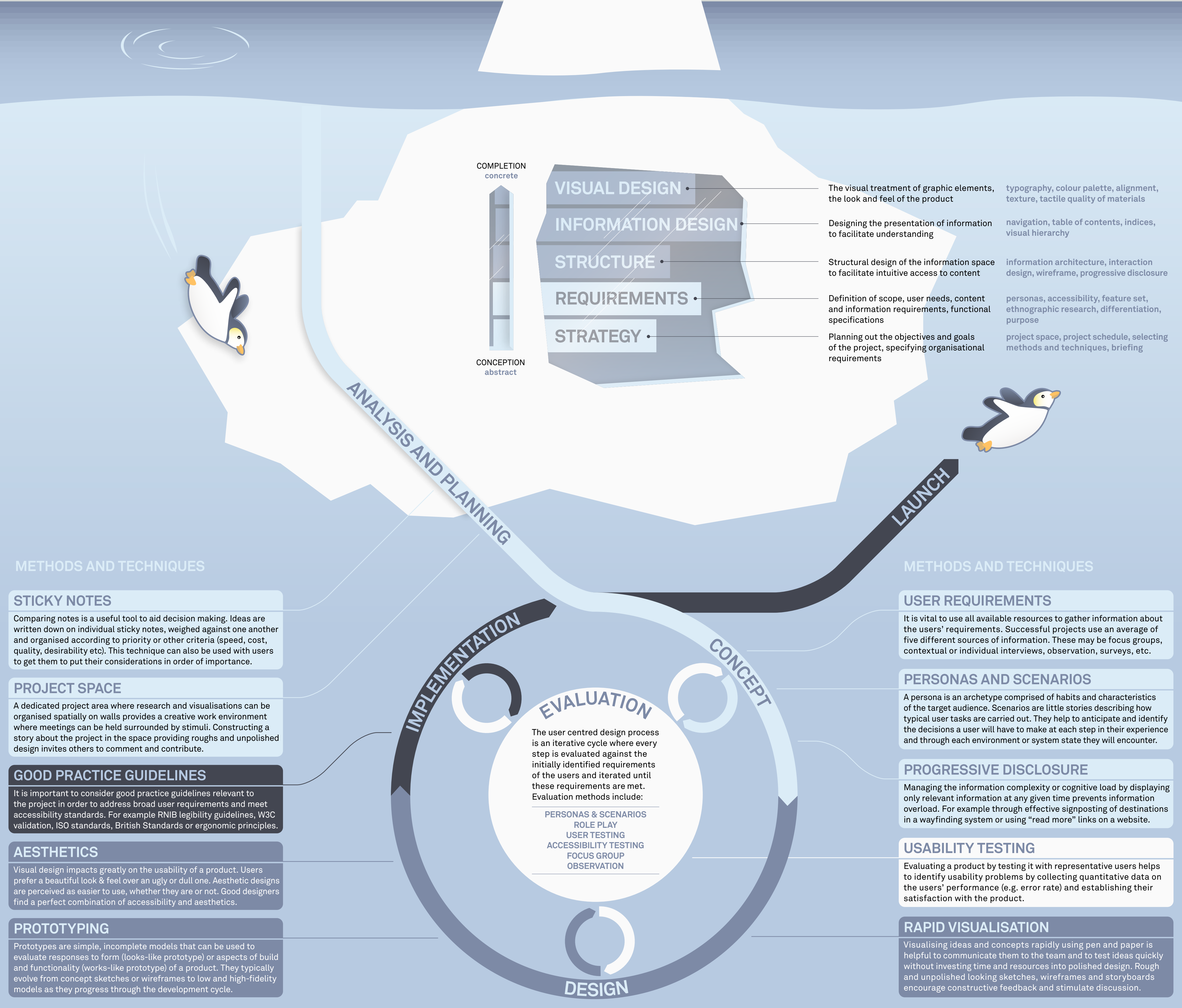


“THE CENTRAL PREMISE OF USER CENTRED DESIGN IS THAT THE BEST DESIGNED PRODUCTS AND SERVICES RESULT FROM UNDERSTANDING THE NEEDS OF THE PEOPLE WHO WILL USE THEM.” — Design Council

Good design is more than meets the eye. The visual part of a design – the look and feel – is only the tip of the iceberg. Beneath the surface lies the foundation of a successful design: a user centred design process. It is a development cycle which takes into consideration what users really need and makes adjustments by exploring, testing and tuning the design until these needs are satisfied. The result of this is a high level of usability: the design is effective, efficient, engaging and easy to learn. The process can be applied to all design

practices that have the aim to provide a good user experience. This includes web design, interface design, product design, editorial design, urban design, wayfinding, service design and architecture.

There are a variety of tools, techniques and methods at each stage of the process which are used to progress the design. Some of them are explained here. The product's probability of success is greatly increased by understanding and using these techniques.



METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

STICKY NOTES

Comparing notes is a useful tool to aid decision making. Ideas are written down on individual sticky notes, weighed against one another and organised according to priority or other criteria (speed, cost, quality, desirability etc). This technique can also be used with users to get them to put their considerations in order of importance.

PROJECT SPACE

A dedicated project area where research and visualisations can be organised spatially on walls provides a creative work environment where meetings can be held surrounded by stimuli. Constructing a story about the project in the space providing roughs and unpolished design invites others to comment and contribute.

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINES

It is important to consider good practice guidelines relevant to the project in order to address broad user requirements and meet accessibility standards. For example RNIB legibility guidelines, W3C validation, ISO standards, British Standards or ergonomic principles.

AESTHETICS

Visual design impacts greatly on the usability of a product. Users prefer a beautiful look & feel over an ugly or dull one. Aesthetic designs are perceived as easier to use, whether they are or not. Good designers find a perfect combination of accessibility and aesthetics.

PROTOTYPING

Prototypes are simple, incomplete models that can be used to evaluate responses to form (looks-like prototype) or aspects of build and functionality (works-like prototype) of a product. They typically evolve from concept sketches or wireframes to low and high-fidelity models as they progress through the development cycle.

METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

USER REQUIREMENTS

It is vital to use all available resources to gather information about the users' requirements. Successful projects use an average of five different sources of information. These may be focus groups, contextual or individual interviews, observation, surveys, etc.

PERSONAS AND SCENARIOS

A persona is an archetype comprised of habits and characteristics of the target audience. Scenarios are little stories describing how typical user tasks are carried out. They help to anticipate and identify the decisions a user will have to make at each step in their experience and through each environment or system state they will encounter.

PROGRESSIVE DISCLOSURE

Managing the information complexity or cognitive load by displaying only relevant information at any given time prevents information overload. For example through effective signposting of destinations in a wayfinding system or using "read more" links on a website.

USABILITY TESTING

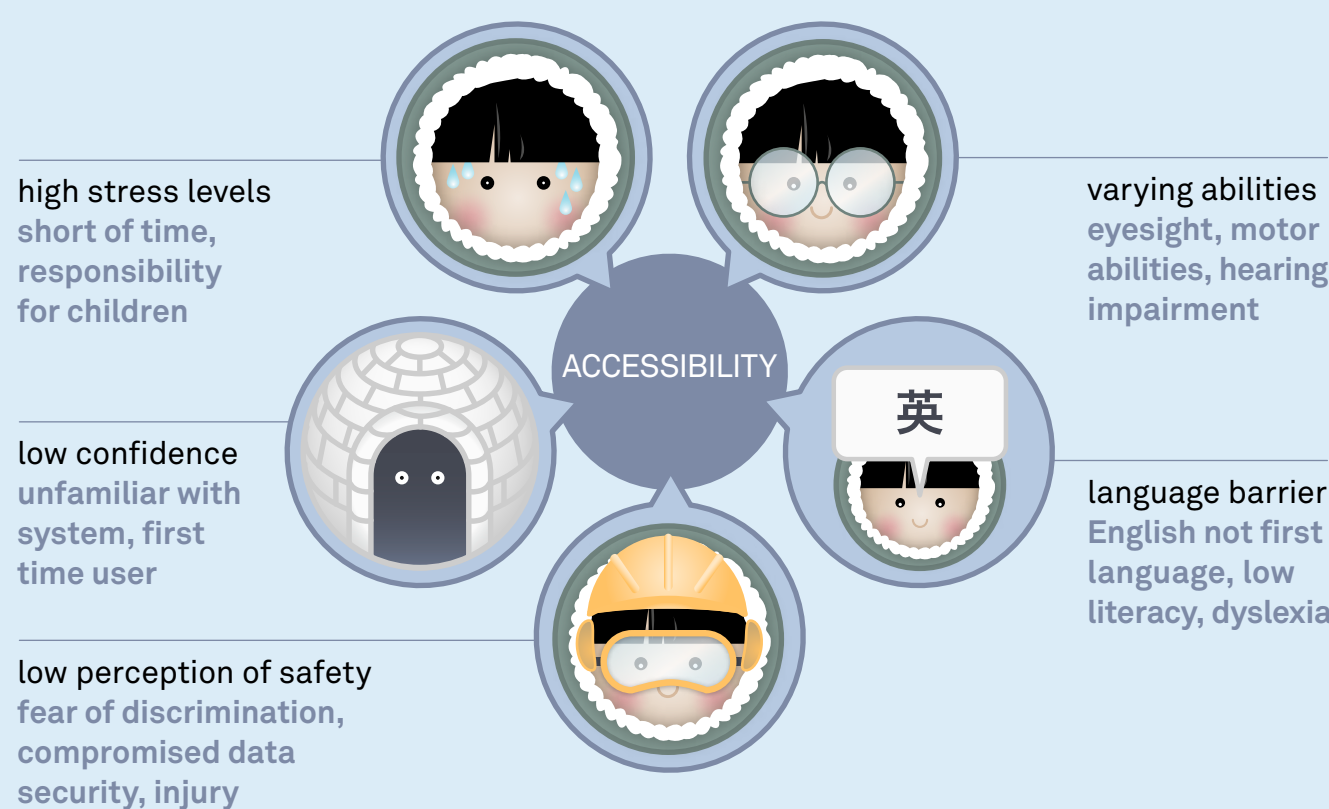
Evaluating a product by testing it with representative users helps to identify usability problems by collecting quantitative data on the users' performance (e.g. error rate) and establishing their satisfaction with the product.

RAPID VISUALISATION

Visualising ideas and concepts rapidly using pen and paper is helpful to communicate them to the team and to test ideas quickly without investing time and resources into polished design. Rough and unpolished looking sketches, wireframes and storyboards encourage constructive feedback and stimulate discussion.

USER CAPABILITIES

Users have different requirements depending on their situation and capabilities. Catering for these needs and enabling access to the product or system for as many people as possible is the aim of inclusive design.



USER GOALS

Users' needs depend on what they are trying to achieve when they use the product. These user goals inform the information requirements that need to be addressed in order to achieve a high level of usability.



USER INVOLVEMENT

The most successful results are achieved when the user is involved in every step of the design process either through direct feedback, user testing, observation or informed evaluation using previously gathered information.

