

## LOOKING HOMEWARD

“Home! Home! Sweet, sweet home! There’s no place like home!

John Howard Payne, 1791-1852

from the Opera “Clari, the Maid of Milan”

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*“In the coming world, the capacity to face the new appropriately is more important than the ability to know and repeat the old.”*

Carl Rogers

Most designers and architects are convinced that they are on the cutting edge of future planning and design. As I travel around the world and listen to different presentations on global changes and human need for housing, I am convinced that there is only a handful of people who really are the leaders in design. And they are not necessarily the ones who walk away with awards, recognition and large contracts. They are the ones who have learned to listen to the experts, the consumer, have changed their attitude about what is really important in the living environment and have accepted the challenges that Universal Design and accessibility are creating. They are addressing and designing for changing global statistics and the real person.

We continually see multiple step entrances in front of multi-level dwellings, winding staircases, and large, expensive bathrooms and kitchens that are menaces to safety and function. And they are recognized as good design. We have to start changing our parameters of design and start acknowledging what really is good. And we have to start now.

Several years ago I had a contract to teach the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) and its ACCESSIBILITY Guidelines (ADAAG) to architects and designers. At that time I felt that laws were really not necessary, and that common sense would prevail when it came to accessibility and good, safe design. Boy, was I wrong! I now feel, after traveling all over the world, lecturing, researching and listening to what really are humane design parameters I am convinced that we need laws to encourage common sense. Although this article will be focusing on design for single family homes, accessibility affects every aspect of creativity that affects people.

Currently, in America, there are no national laws addressing single family homes. Only recently have Universal Design and Visitability been introduced in state and local building codes, specifying accessibility, adaptability and no step entrances. The strength of lobbying came from the consumer. The government is supporting it by offering incentives, training and tax relief. Nationally there are guidelines for multiple family homes and public spaces. The Rehab Act of 1973, the ADA signed in 1990 and the FHA signed guidelines of 1991 set parameters of accessibility for publicly funded buildings, privately owned public accommodations and multifamily homes. We are using these federal laws as guidelines for single family homes. Changing the paradigm of these laws will change the paradigm of the traditional single-family homes. Now we have to change the attitude of those involved in the design process.

The Fair Housing guidelines are vague in scoping and showing how to install, but definite in the areas addressed:

- Accessible entrances on accessible routes
- Accessible public and common areas in buildings
- Wider doorways into and within apartments
- Lever door handles
- Usable bathrooms and kitchens
- Adaptable kitchen and bathroom cabinets
- Environmental controls, light switches to be within accessible reach
- Single lever controls on all faucets
- Reinforced bathroom walls

The ADAAG are guidelines showing the way to specify the construction and installation. We can meet the challenge of accessibility in single family homes without sacrificing aesthetics by accepting the challenge to create good design with safety, and inclusiveness as our first criteria. Although not complete, both the FHA and ADAAG offer good, acceptable guidelines to go by.

What will it really mean when we start introducing no step entrances, wider doorways, and accessible bathrooms and kitchens into single family homes? It will mean the difference between living at home versus staying in an institution if an accident or illness creates an infirmary that requires accessibility. It will mean that families can stay together longer, age in place, be more independent, remain in the mainstream of productivity and social activities, It will mean that friends and family can be integrated into the mainstream of social life. It will mean that a wider market would be able to purchase a wider range of homes. It will mean that most assistive technology can be introduced in the home setting without major adaptations. We are talking about families. We are talking about people. We are addressing safer and more functional design and eliminating, in many cases, alienation, discrimination, solitary confinement, and the costs involved in institutional care. It will mean the end of costly modifications. It will mean that more people can go home again after a major life change has occurred instead having only the option of institutional living.

Living at home with care costs on the average of \$15,000 a year. Living in an institution runs between \$30,000 and \$80,000 per year. And the cost of pain, the loss of independence, and suffering of broken families is not calculated into this number, neither is the quality of care.

In America today approximately 80% of all Americans will require specialized needs in housing. Approximately 54 million people rely on assistive technology. Retirement communities have decreased. Only 10% of our senior citizens live in age-restricted communities. Seniors keep working. Middle age stretches toward 80 years – numbering 9 million and rising to 15 million in 2025. Four out of 5 Americans over the age 80 live in integrated communities. With change of statistics in our population, why are we still building prisons in the form of castles; “Charity Homes” that are not accessible (where the benfactee cannot live); staircases that are the cause of many accidents; and bathrooms that are unsafe for anyone to use? Why are designers still using slippery tile, marble, granite, and vinyl for flooring, especially in bathrooms, kitchens and foyers? Most accidents occur in the home. Safety and function must be the top priorities of design, instead of ego.

Why are we offering awards to new homes that are not accessible and that eliminate 54 million people from living and purchasing it? What is wrong with this picture?

Do we really want our American landscape to be filled with ramps? Malls and parking lots are bad enough. Ramps, when built, may be in accordance with the law, but very often they are unsightly, poorly constructed and are unsafe. Berming in both new and retrofitted homes can address changes in levels and terrain. No step entrances are safe and very attractive, and they open the door to everyone. Landscape architects can have a field day with new, unusual and environmental friendly landscaping. And homes can still be built on crawl spaces

The argument against Universal Design and Visitability is that it will raise the cost of a home and put it out of the market for many people. What will the cost be? Installing lever hardware costs the same as round doorknobs. Prewiring for automatic door openers, remote control features, “smart” accessibility will enable a person to include most any assistive devices if they are needed and it is a fraction of the cost of wiring after construction. Planning for the addition of any elevator is just planning stacked closet space. Creating an accessible, adaptable bathroom initially makes more sense than waiting until it’s necessary. What does it cost to include blocking behind the drywall around the bathtub/shower surround and the toilet area? What does it cost to have it installed later on? The cost of adding wider doorways is balanced by less drywall. Eliminating thresholds, including roll-in showers, all demand better use of space, and creative design. I know a man who holds a master degree in rehabilitation medicine and is forced to crawl into his bathroom to use it. His doorway and bathroom are too narrow for his chair. Increasing the size of the bathroom increases the value of the house. And I don’t have to tell you how expensive it is to do a retrofit. Planning good turning space in the kitchen and bathrooms, adding shallow storage pantries, including adjustable or multi-height work surfaces are inexpensive and adds to the function of each space,

making even the most modest home more marketable and functional. All it requires is a change of “standards”, a change of attitude, a change of law.

There have been many studies as to the cost of these design features. Some say it will add 20% to the cost. I say that's hogwash. There are many excuses to avoid making changes in traditional trades. They're just taking advantage of what they know to be good design. I designed and built a house with all of these features and the additional cost was so negligible that 1% would be an overstatement. There are many testimonies to this. There is a saying that “if you think education is expensive, try calculating the cost of ignorance”. Well, try calculating the cost of nursing homes, broken families, institutional care and alienation from society.

Universal design features are seamless, address the real issues of human frailties and are proven to be more profitable because it opens the market to more people. There are now tax incentives, low interest mortgage money, vouchers available to developers that make it more attractive to build accessible single family affordable homes. HUD is offering technical assistance in the design process. States and localities are instituting new guidelines for affordable, accessible and adaptable designs. Texas, Illinois, California, New York, Vermont, Georgia, and Florida are just a few states that have included accessibility, Universal Design and /or Visitability into their single family building codes either statewide or at local city levels.

#### What Can YOU Do?

Support including Universal Design concepts for new constructions. Take advantage of housing initiatives from the Assistive Technology (AT) Act Grantees. There is one in every state through the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation “Research (NIDRR). If you are a consumer, demand your right to have the features that you need in your home. If you are a builder, start changing the way you think about getting things done and listen to the needs of your consumer. If you are a designer or architect put away your ego and take on the challenges of designing a more livable world. If you are a banker offer financial incentives to affordable, accessible house plans. If you are a teacher, teach theories of good, safer, more functional design. If you are a manufacturer, encourage your designers to ask the user about their products and develop and fabricate them. The demand will be there if the supply is there. If you are a politician, remember there are 54 million Americans out there that could be productive, tax paying individuals rather than a ward of the state. Pass laws, grants, tax deductions and credits that will make housing affordable, accessible, and available. Everyone will profit.

We all have the responsibility to assure that it is truly possible to go home again.

#### Some Funding Information

- Special funding Alert on HUD Section 8 vouchers [www.c-c-d.org/nofa2000.pdf](http://www.c-c-d.org/nofa2000.pdf) (HR 1776) Rental Vouchers can be used toward mortgage payments.
- HUD SuperNOFA-Funding availability for the Section 811 Program of Supportive Housing for Person with Disabilities
- HUD Community Consolidated Plans [www.hud.gov/progdsc.conplan.html](http://www.hud.gov/progdsc.conplan.html)
- National Home of your Own Alliance <http://alliance.unh.edu/> - information center
- National Low Income Housing Coalition [www.nlihc.org/](http://www.nlihc.org/) - low-income housing trends and statistics.
- Fannie Mae “HomeChoice” Homeownership 1-800-7FANNIE - Consumer Resource Center
- National Council of State Housing Agencies <http://www.ncsha.org/NCSHA/NCSHAL2/directry/statindz.html>
- Federal Home Loan Banks [www.fhlbs.com](http://www.fhlbs.com) offering Home Options Program
- The Farmers Home Administration (FmHA)
- Veteran Administration

For more information on introducing Universal Design and Visitability to the codes visit [www.resna.org/taproject/at/statecontacts.html](http://www.resna.org/taproject/at/statecontacts.html) as a starting point and go from there.

There is only one man in the world, and his name is All Men.

There is only one woman in the world and her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world and the child's name is All Children

... Carl Sandburg

Bibliography

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