

ONDESIGN- MARCH 2001
PLANNING TODAY FOR TOMORROW - OR LOOKING HOMEWARD
Shirley Confino-Rehder CID, affil AIA

Home! Home! Sweet, sweet home! There's no place like home!
...John Howard Payne 1791-1852
Clari, the Maid of Milan (opera)

In America, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Rehabilitation Act address accessibility in public and government buildings, and the Fair Housing Guidelines (FHA) are written for multifamily houses, but there are no national codes for single-family homes. The public has to depend on sensitivity, common sense and the designer, and a handful of advocates around the country to be watchdogs over the way specifications are written for single-family homes, homes that can often become prisons if a disability strikes the family that occupies it. Why do we find it so hard to recreate the standards so that future homes could be easier to age in place and everyone could find it easier to visit?

The FHA guidelines require:

- Accessible entrances on accessible routes
- Public and common areas in buildings to be accessible and usable by people with disabilities
- Wider doorways into and within apartments
- Lever door handles
- Usable bathrooms and kitchens
- Environmental controls and light switches to be within accessible reach
- Single lever controls on all faucets
- Reinforced bathroom walls.

Why can't we use this as a guideline for single-family homes? We have to start addressing the real issues of the growing older population and the 54 million people with disabilities that must have a place to live. Isn't it time the home designer, architect, and builder realize the potential profits from this growing market. We are talking about people. We are talking about families. We are also talking about institutional living versus aging in place. Institutional living has never been and can never be Home Sweet Home by any stretch of the imagination. And that is what a lot of people have to resort to because these are such shortages of affordable, accessible homes in America today, and retrofitting can be so expensive.

I remember being called in by a client whose was in total grief. Her husband of 45 years, a retired postal worker, had a pinched nerve in his back, went to for surgery, and was left with quadriplegia. Soon after installing a hospital bed and all the life sustaining equipment in his small, but comfortable home, he insisted, "for the sake of the family", to be taken back to the local veteran's hospital for the rest of his life so that he wouldn't burden his wife, who missed him terribly, or

destroy the integrity of his now too small, inaccessible home they had just purchased. He begged her to restore the home to its original decor. The doorways were too narrow, the retrofitted roll-in shower kept flooding the hallway, the installation of too steep a ramp was a hazard to use, and he was unable in ability to get into any room of the house or deck without assistance. He resigned himself to separation from family and friends to live out his life in a nursing home. Why was this necessary, and how often do families have to make this choice because of inadequately designed homes?

The real facts are 80% Americans will require specialized needs in housing and approximately 54 million people rely on assistive technology. The cost of living at home is \$15,000 versus in the range of \$20,000-80,000 in an institution. Retirement communities have decreased and now only 10% of our senior citizens live in age-restricted communities. More and more seniors are working full and part time, middle age is stretching toward 80 - and will be rising to 15 million in 2025. Four out of five Americans over the age of 80 live in, are active in, and are independent within their communities. How is the single family building trade accommodating these astonishing facts? What is the government doing about the realities that are now upon us?

As you walk through neighborhoods, ride through communities have you noticed how common it is to see a ramp? Is this what future home will look like? These are design challenges that have solutions. Universal Design concepts applied to building codes can offer common sense solutions. Aesthetics do not have to be comprised. What are the benefits of accessibility, what are the REAL costs?

First let's look at what has to be addressed in the building codes. Keep in mind that location of construction will determine the final safety and welfare guidelines.

1. Level entrances
2. Wheel chair dimension when designing passage and doorways
3. Reinforced walls in bathrooms for future installation of grab bars
4. Seated anthropometrics when installing all controls
5. Lever hardware and adjustable closet rods
6. Non-slip flooring
7. Elimination of thresholds wherever possible
8. An accessible full bathroom and bedroom on the first floor.
9. Adaptable kitchens and bathrooms
10. Back up electrical system wiring
11. Side wall clearances for frontal and side approaches to doorways
12. Redesign of stairs
13. Betting placement of lighting at foot and head of stairs, in hallways
14. Redesigning of bathroom fixture placements
15. Sustainable and environmental construction and finishes.

The guidelines for minimum measurements are in the ADA Accessibility Guidelines (ADAAG). The costs have been proven to be nothing or next to nothing. Homes built can be anyone's castle or prison, no matter what the budget.

The benefits of a change in the parameters of standards in design are:

1. A more independent society
2. A larger base of potential taxpayers, voters, and community leaders,
3. Safer home environments for everyone
4. The encouragement of multi-generation living
5. A larger market
6. Attention to the realities of today and the future population

Universal Design concepts applied to single family homes are now receiving recognition by the government agencies that are addressing the needs of the low-income families. To encourage accessibility in affordable housing former HUD Secretary Andrew Cuomo instituted technical assistance, the HOME Program, grants, and low interest mortgages. Section 8 vouchers can now be used as down payments for purchasing homes. The Veterans Administration, FannieMae, the Farmers Home Administration and local banking institutions are also offering attractive mortgage packages for affordable, accessible newly constructed home. There are tax deductions, tax credits for adaptations, and block grants. Private organizations working with local housing programs are offering subsidies for affordable, accessible developments by offering grants and low interest mortgages to developers and homeowners.

Visitability, accessibility, and Universal Design have been written in several local codes today.

Georgia, Texas, parts of California and Illinois are just a few of the states that have addressed accessibility.

In March '98, Parliament passed the mandate creating access to all new homes throughout England and Wales.

Wake up designers of today for tomorrow! There is money to be made, a greater market to be explored, challenges of creativity to be met, and responsibilities to take on. Now, as never before, you CAN make a difference.

Support Universal Design, accessibility, and better design in homes of every budget. Advocate accessibility on a local and state level. One day, you just may the benefit of your own advocacy.

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

This is the reason. This is the Challenge. We have to open the world to all people so if anything does happens, yes, we can go home again.