

Excerpts from

Accessible Environments:

Toward Universal Design

by Ronald L. Mace, Graeme J. Hardie, Jaine P. Place

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SYNOPSIS

Faced with a growing population of people with disabilities and advancing years, designers are finding an increased market as well as legal pressure to produce products, buildings and exterior spaces that are accessible to everyone.

The Disability Rights Movement has achieved considerable success in its effort to lobby for equal civil and environmental rights for Americans who, until recently, have been excluded on the basis of physical disability or extremes of size. The Americans with Disabilities Act requires that -- in addition to education, government programs and housing -- public accommodations, public transportation and telecommunications be designed and operated in such a way that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as others.

The perceived lack of market for specialized, accessible design services is a myth. At least 36 million Americans have permanent disabilities, and the rate of prevalence of severe disability has increased by 70% since 1966. In the growing population over 65 years of age, 46% have either limited or severe disabilities. The number may be even larger. The Arthritis Foundation places the number of people having only arthritic conditions capable of causing disabling conditions at 37 million. The magnitude of these figures obligates designers to consider the entire life span, including periods of temporary disability, of future users of the spaces or products being designed.

Universal design means simply designing all products, buildings and exterior spaces to be usable by all people to the greatest extent possible. It is advanced here as a sensible and economical way to reconcile the artistic integrity of a design with human needs in the environment. Solutions which result in no additional cost and no noticeable change in appearance can come about from knowledge about people, simple planning and careful selection of conventional products.

In addition to fixed, universally designed features, designers may include adaptable elements. These can be easily and economically added or removed when needed for a specific user. Such flexible facilities and products are usable by almost everyone and are thus significantly more marketable.

Universal and adaptable features are generally no more expensive than traditional features if incorporated by the designer at the programming and conceptual stages. The cost-conscious designer must consider and

advise clients concerning not only construction costs related to accessibility, but also the long-term costs of ignoring a potentially huge segment of the population. Clients must also be made aware of the trend toward stricter accessibility standards in employment, housing, education and public services.

Many recent innovations in technology have made it easier for designers to specify both universal and specialized components. As the construction and manufacturing industries respond to the aging of the population and new legal strictures, "better for everyone" and "planning ahead for your family's needs" will begin to replace "handicapped" and "elderly" as marketing approaches.

As comfort, safety, and flexibility become more important key words in advertising, emerging technologies will continue to respond to the needs of people of all ages, abilities and sizes. Designers will be faced with a choice: reluctant compliance with minimum accessibility standards, or a positive, sensitive offering of universal design services.

A complete copy of this chapter is available from The Center for Universal Design. Please refer to the Center's [Publications List](#) for ordering information.

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