

A WHEELCHAIR USER'S PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING A NEW HOME: STEVE'S STORY

I interviewed four wheelchair users who had recently built a home as part of my PhD research project. This is what Steve had to say about the process.

Steve sustained a spinal cord injury more than fifteen years ago and is an active member of a disability advocacy organisation and understands the regulations related to public access as well as issues for people living in social housing. Steve and his wife recently built a two storey project home. As they wanted most things as standard, that is, nothing that needed to custom made, and the designs were spacious, they thought a project home would be quite suitable, and the costs of an architect could be avoided. However, they did not allow for builder resistance towards what they considered minor changes to standard features:

“We used a project home because ... we were told they know the standard sizes and so they can work with that. ...so unless you are having some [custom made or imported feature], everything is standard, so I think it is more the mindset of the builder – this is how I've always done it, this is how my grandfather taught me how to do it.

Nevertheless, when Steve began to interact with the tradespeople he found that with a little explanation and some persuasion, small changes were acceptable even if they were not standard practice:

“The plumbers, once they got their head around the idea of putting a shower hose – instead of putting the connection at the top, you can put it at the bottom of the pole – that gives you much more room with the hose to play with. Originally there was sucking in of breath through the teeth and then oh, of course we can. It was like, all defences were up 'cos it's something different and then hmmm, yeah. So thinking outside the box, eventually they realised it was no problem at all, in fact, it saved them a bit of copper. I think it's that mindset of how we've always done it so therefore we can't differ.”

Steve thought there might be a fear of litigation possibly due to concern about making mistakes if they don't fully understand what the client wants and that a mistake “could lead to all kinds of liabilities and all those things.” The concern over mistakes may be one of the reasons for the inflated charges associated with any changes to the standard house design because the “minute we were outside the ordinary, God, you paid through the nose for it.”

Similarly to other interviewees, achieving level access throughout, including outdoor areas, proved difficult. In this particular case, the outdoor area was designed to be under the roof line and they “have never had problems even with horizontal rain”. Although level access to the alfresco was agreed by the builder, they demanded a disclaimer for water intrusion:

“We had a bone of contention with our builders because we wanted to take the level access through to the bi-fold doors so I could wheel out with the barbeque tongs. We won in the end but we had to sign a disclaimer saying that it is not classed as weather proof. And they did not like the idea of not having a step at the front door.”

Linked to this was the issue of resistance to change even when the solutions pose few, if any problems:

“It was a bit of a fight to get their mindset changed. There’s no difference between having a step down and a slope. Rain doesn’t go up slopes. Why wouldn’t you want access in and out of the house for all entrances?”

Nevertheless, Steve had to make adjustments to the internal entry to the garage because it was set lower than the house slab, creating a step. However, it was frustrating to learn later from the person constructing the slab that this was not necessary:

“We did have a bit of a step down into the garage, but luckily we had this epoxy resin floor that we could build up. But it wasn’t until the slab guy came and said normally for people in wheelchairs we do it flat. So I thought oh, so it can be done, it has been done before.”

The step up into the wet areas was a cause for concern for Steve as it was with other participants. As Steve could not access the second storey during construction to monitor the progress, his wife was assigned the task of climbing ladders and taking video pictures of progress on the second storey. It was at this point Steve discovered a small step had appeared at the entrance to the ensuite bathroom. When he questioned the builders they dismissed his request as incidental:

“My poor wife would climb up ladders and video things, and they built a step into the ensuite – there was about an inch step up. So I said, what are you doing? And they said, oh that’s what we always do. They said, it’s alright, we’ll build you a little ramp. If I wanted ramps I would have just got any old house.”

Steve remained firm and eventually level access was agreed, but at a cost. The floor had already been laid and the cost to remove and re-lay the floor was estimated at eight thousand dollars. The builders asked Steve to pay half, and in order to prevent the work from being delayed further, he agreed on the basis that as a proportion of the overall cost, four thousand dollars was not a large amount:

“[The builder said] it was going to cost eight thousand dollars, and they said would we meet them half way. Eventually we did, just because I didn’t want to hold it up, and in the scheme of things, what’s four grand over the overall cost of the house.”

Nevertheless, it was the attitude of the building company that perplexed Steve. The unanswered question for him was that once the builder knew level access was required

throughout, why did they think that an additional ramp or small step was not an issue? Steve put it down to poor internal communication in spite of providing detailed drawings and instructions throughout the project:

“And that was the kind of thing where I thought, where did that come from? What on earth made you think – and a lot of it I think just slipped through the net, because you know even if you tell the architect, and the architect tells the builder, and they tell the tiler ... “

Charging the client more than cost price for the changes may be linked to poor communication systems. Steve said the builder confessed that the additional charges, around twenty percent, are to cover contingencies for the likely mistakes caused by tradespeople failing to follow instructions:

“So I had done as much as I possibly could but if they don’t pass it down to the ground man – that’s where it’s costing money, that’s where mistakes will happen because you will have a labourer coming in doing what he always does. They guy actually said, the reason we charge twenty percent more is if we screw up we’ll be able to re-do it.”

The only changes Steve and his wife made to kitchen design was to ensure the flooring was installed first and the kitchen cabinets placed on top. This enables easy and cost effective removal of cabinets to allow knee space under benches should it be needed in the future. The issue of designing around the different members of the household can be problematic, but most families are able to work out what is best for them:

“I don’t have open spaces under kitchen benches, because, to be quite honest I don’t cook, my wife does, so there would be no point in modifying the kitchen design for me. It has to suit her. But what we have is floorboards that go right under the benches so if we do want to pull a cupboard out, the floor is already there. Why can’t that be the case everywhere? It’s not rocket science.”

Summary: Unfulfilled promises

As he was happy with standard features, Steve thought building a project home would be fairly straightforward. Although standard materials were used throughout, any changes to standard construction practices caused significant problems. These were largely due to communication issues within the chain of command. His requests, complete with detailed drawings, were not reaching the trades personnel, or if they were, they were being ignored. However, when he was able to communicate directly with the plumber, for example, he was able to explain how a small change in the plumbing arrangements could significantly improve the function of the shower for him. The issue of a twenty percent surcharge on any changes to the standard design appears to be a risk management strategy for dealing with the cost of rectifying mistakes that are likely to be caused by poor communication and tradespeople failing to check for and follow any new instructions. Steve found that most of

the project homes were spatially suitable and only needed small changes to design details to improve accessibility and functionality. The way in which the family functions determined the design of the kitchen rather than the requirements of one particular family member. However, provision was made for future adaptations should they be required.

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