

A WHEELCHAIR USER'S PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING A NEW HOME: TOMAS TELLS HIS STORY

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

Tomas and his wife Lisa are both wheelchair users. Tomas has been using a wheelchair since childhood and grew up in Europe in a country where, compared to Australia, assistive technology and accessible accommodation are more readily available for people with disability. Lisa sustained a spinal cord injury some twenty years ago and had her current house altered by a builder with whom she was previously acquainted. When Tomas and Lisa married they lived in Lisa's house for a short while before building new home with the help of Lisa's builder who recommended an architect. Now they have children, they are in the process of building a new house and are using the same builder and architect. Tomas began the interview by saying that because of personal connections, to this point, the experience has been good:

“Because of the great experience we've had with both the architect and the builder we [are using] the same guys again.”

To gain a better perspective of the personal connections, I asked Tomas to tell me about Lisa's house when they first got together. After Lisa had her accident, the builder helped out with some basic alterations, but the inexperience was apparent:

“I think it must have been a massive learning process. When I got there, I saw the place. You could tell it was done by someone who didn't have a lot of experience.”

The main design issues for Thomas were those of “tacked-on” rather than integrated solutions, which “were perfectly fine, but you could definitely tell it was an altered place.” Their current home has integrated designs and most importantly, more space:

“When you're with two people in wheelchairs, you need to manoeuvre around each other, which means ... as soon as you put a bed and some furniture in a place it becomes challenging to move around in a wheelchair, let alone two wheelchairs. So definitely [need] floor space ... it's very crucial that you look at where you going to move and where you move at the same time ... [so] you don't get annoyed with each other constantly running into each other.

The need for extra space will require a two storey home, particularly to give the children their own space. Based on the design of their current home, they will make changes to the kitchen, bathroom and pool designs and eliminate gardening. The challenge was to create bathrooms and a kitchen that are “great to use but look very attractive at the same time.” Their brief to the architect for their new home was to create an attractive design without compromising functionality:

“Make it look fantastic ... do whatever you can so that it doesn't look like a rehab facility.”

Tomas and Lisa both have full time jobs and prepare for their day at the same time. They are overcoming this with two showers in the ensuite so that Tomas no longer has to share a bathroom with the children. Because they cannot go to the beach they decided on a pool, but the design took some time to resolve because they did not want “big ramps and hoists and that kind of stuff” and it was important to have easy access to the skimmer box, which was not the case in their current home:

“One of my biggest frustrations, which might seem minor, is the pool, the skimmer box – I can't get to it. I have to get out of my chair in order to clean the pool – pretty silly – something the pool designer didn't think of – the wheelchair thing. And at that stage of building the house, I didn't think of it – I've never built a pool before.”

While the pool designer failed to think through the issues for a wheelchair user, the architect is paying more attention to these smaller issues. Tomas explained the architect “did a lot of drawing and measuring, [for] a really good understanding” of how they moved around in the home.

Tomas said things had run smoothly with Council so far, and he mentioned that this might be due to Lisa having a high profile in the local community. They had built up a good relationship with the builder with their first house and were confident that they could dispense with the architect's services once the plans were with council. For Tomas and Lisa, this was both cost effective and convenient:

“We're using the same architect, but we are not going to get him to project manage it, we are going to get the builder to take that responsibility. He's local ... he drops by with drawings.”

Throughout the interview Tomas discussed differences between Australia and Europe on matters of government support for people with disability, and the way the housing industry approaches home design. I asked Tomas if he thought his builder would now incorporate more accessible design in other houses. Tomas did not think so, because in Australia the house and land package format allows purchasers some measure of design individualisation before construction takes place. Consequently the builder is driven by customer specifications, so including greater accessibility is not necessarily an option:

“When you're building here compared to Europe – not a lot of people actually design their house – lots of housing is built as an estate. [In Australia] I think there are a lot of small builders that build exactly to the specs of what the customer wants. They're not in a situation to put too much of their idealism into place.”

According to Thomas many European governments assist with home design, and use builders with experience, which is not only efficient, it provides a better outcome:

“In Europe ... the government does all of that for you - you’ve got certain builders and companies that come and they use proper techniques and products. So in Australia, you’re always kind of looking to reinvent the wheel each and every time ... because nobody really knows, they’re not specialised – there’s no money in it. ... In general, I don’t think the builders really know what they are doing.”

However, Tomas acknowledged that if you have an experienced builder and access to sufficient funds, the results can be better than those achieved in Europe. It was at this point he introduced a related issue, one also raised by Mike, about designer assumptions underpinning some design features such as grab rails. In Australia there is more opportunity to minimise the obvious ‘disabled’ features that are not needed so that “the results are probably better than in Europe because you don’t get all the overkill.” While every need had been considered, Tomas did not consider it the perfect solution:

“I [recently went to] Europe and I went to some houses there and when a person gets there they get all the renovations done. It’s just amazing, the amount of equipment and space they create, you could tell straight away that this is a place for someone in a wheelchair, which I don’t find very attractive.”

The issue of design ‘overkill’ was significant for two reasons: the future saleability of the home and personal self-esteem. It was important therefore that the house not look like an institution or public facility:

“We are thinking commercially as well, so we are thinking re-sell ...you don’t want to sell a hospital. And on top of that – we’re pretty proud people and very independent and the last thing you want is that when someone walks in they straight away see this is a place for people in wheelchairs. You don’t want hoists and disabled related materials lying around everywhere – you want them to be nicely integrated.”

At the end of the interview I asked Tomas what advice he might have for a wheelchair user building their own home. He felt that spending initial time researching the options was very important including visiting the homes of other wheelchair users if possible:

“I think spending sufficient time on research is crucial [before engaging an architect] because an architect has no idea – you need to educate them, in general, unless you are lucky enough to get an architect that has done it previously.”

Summary: Collaborative success story

Tomas and his Lisa have gained considerable experience in house design to suit active wheelchair users – they know it is possible to combine functionality and aesthetics. In the absence of architects and builders with training or experience in accessible house design, it has been their role to provide the education. Tomas and Lisa have been fortunate in having

personal contacts in the house building industry who were willing to collaborate with them in a genuine team effort and this has provided a relatively less stressful process than experienced by other participants. Tomas' experiences in Europe provided an interesting contrast. On the one hand, government assistance provides functional accommodation for wheelchair users, but on the other, it tends to be institutional in its design which is aesthetically unpleasant. Being able to design a home that eliminates institutional features is the preferred option for Tomas and Lisa.

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