



UNIVERSAL DESIGN: WHY WOULDN'T YOU?

Dr Jane Bringolf discusses the benefits of universal design and how the features are convenient for everyone at some point in their lives.

I heard the catch phrase, "Why wouldn't you?" in an online video selling the virtues of home design features incorporating the principles of universal design. The question was posed to potential purchasers. However, I think that question is just as relevant for the house-building sector.

Why wouldn't you incorporate features such as a step free entrance that is so convenient for everyone at some point in their daily life? For example, bringing in the shopping, pushing in the stroller, wheeling in a heavy pot plant, lifting in the big new sofa, and providing easy access for paramedics in an emergency. And of course, it is great for grandma with her

wheelie walker, and grandson who broke his leg.

Universal design features are too often linked with disability and the image of wheelchair users. There is no doubt that wheelchair users and their families benefit from level entry into their own home and the homes of others. The problem with focusing on wheelchair users is that the benefits to others get lost.

If most wheelchair users can get in and out of their home and live there comfortably then everyone else will find the home comfortable too. And a reminder: universal design is not about hospital design and grab rails. There is no need to have any installed.

Housing is probably one of the only products on the market that deliberately excludes a significant proportion of the population.

Product manufacturers, tourism businesses and designers of phone apps, for example, have learned the value of including as many people as possible in their designs. They don't consider people with disability and older people as a group that is somehow the 'responsibility of government' that needs specialised and segregated products. Indeed, they are revising their services and products to gain a larger share of this growing market.

As I wrote in a previous article, the Australian Building Codes Board (ABCB)

will be producing a Regulatory Impact Statement (RIS) in the first half of next year. They are using the term 'Accessible Housing'.

The RIS will assess the benefits and costs of including basic universal design features in ALL new housing. Well, if it is all new housing, it is not a special kind of housing, it is just housing. The problem is that the word 'accessible' is very closely linked with disability in other areas of the National Construction Code (NCC). This means that many people think it will only benefit a few people.

About one in five people report living with a disability and half of those are over 65 years. This is where it pays to think in terms of households and family groups. Tourism operators have woken up to this. For every person with disability that can't use their services they exclude 2-5 other people as well. People with disability rarely travel alone, and they rarely live alone.

The government and construction industry through the ABCB have a wonderful chance to change lives, many lives, our lives – to change them for the better.

The impact of home design on a family's life was brought home to me when I was talking to a young man who had a sporting accident and uses a wheelchair to get around. He said it was bad enough being told he wouldn't walk again, but the worst part was being told he couldn't go home again. He just couldn't get into his house. Even if he was carried in he couldn't use the bathroom. He was excluded from his own home and family.

Research by Phillippa Carnemolla on the benefits of home modifications found that family care hours dropped by 47% after the home was modified. Paid care hours dropped by 17%, not such a big drop, but significant nonetheless. That's because the individual was able to do much more for themselves. This means that carers can get on with their lives, go back to work and also contribute to the economy.

Many home modifications attract a government subsidy. That's because it is cheaper than sending a person to an aged care home. If the home doesn't need modifying then that is also a

saving to the tax payer.

If the consultants working on the RIS check out the balance of costs and benefits, they should also look at the savings and efficiencies. The cost of including universal design features is minimal. But the savings flow on from the initial purchaser to those who follow in the lifetime of the home, as well as the public purse. Less time in hospital, less time in residential aged care, less care hours both paid and unpaid. So greater productivity all round.

Back to the promotional video and the catch cry of, "Why wouldn't you?"

The video tells the story of a joint initiative of a builder and a building designer on the Sunshine Coast. The initiative called Project Silver also gets the tick of approval from the local Mayor. The display homes in the video look just like any other and they put the case very well. However, they claim that the universal design features have an additional cost.

To quote from the video, "These features cost around \$3000 but that could save you \$60,000 down the track". The extra cost is not explained, but Livable Housing Australia, who developed the Silver and Gold levels, claims that if universal design features are designed in at the very beginning the cost, if any, is negligible.

As for the \$60,000 they use a real life example to explain. It is the cost of modifying the home later if it is needed. For example creating step free entries, widening doors, and major conversions to the internal design. And it is not just a financial cost, it is an emotional cost as well, let alone inconvenience to the whole family.

Another home builder in Queensland is also promoting Silver Level homes. He has the support from industry stakeholders in the Townsville area, including Townsville City Council. One of the key points in this video is that there are no design or technical reasons for

not including Silver Level features in all new housing. The video shows how these modern homes are "normal" and not "specialised". However, small and mid-sized building firms can take the initiative. When it comes to mainstream volume builders, this is another matter and why we need regulation.

It will be interesting to see what the ABCB consultants present next year in the RIS. Hopefully, good sense in housing design will prevail for all of us. The good thing about regulation

is that it provides a level playing field and keeps the fragmented house-building industry working together in tandem. There will always be a market for home renovations as fashions change and people move. But we don't do ourselves any favours by continuing to design in redundancy.

For those interested in getting ahead of the game, the Building Designers Association Australia has a seminar program available to everyone called Crossing the Threshold. The seminar is a practical conversation on applying universal design features and will be rolled out in 2020.

It's not rocket science. It is just another way of thinking about home design. Yes, initially it might take a bit of extra thought to change the cookie cutter, but once done, it should be business as usual once more.

Lives change over time but the design of our homes stay the same. If it isn't designed in a way that allows for different scenarios then we are designing homes that limit our lives. So when it comes to designing homes everyone can use, why wouldn't you? ■

If most wheelchair users can get in and out of their home and live there comfortably then everyone else will find the home comfortable too.

Jane Bringolf is a passionate advocate for universal design and promotes inclusive thinking in all the things we humans design, including private housing.



