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Barriers to Universal Design in Australian Housing

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It is not ‘special’ housing

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It’s not

- Adaptable Housing
- Accessible Housing
- Visitable Housing
- Seniors Living
- ‘Disabled’ Housing
- Or any other special type of housing

It’s about including as many features as possible that improve function for everyone

Aim of this study

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To find out why there is resistance to the uptake of universal design in new-build mass market housing in Australia

Approach to the study

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Interpretivist approach:

- Narrative accounts
- Experiences and opinions
- Focus on understanding participant perspectives
- Not just identifying barriers

Want to identify why barriers exist

Participants in the study

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Built environment industry:

- In-depth interviews
- Postal and online survey

New home buyers:

- In-depth interviews
- Postal survey

The industry:

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- Professions and trades
  - Also subject to societal attitudes
  - Technical efficiencies of industry paramount
  - Change required throughout delivery chain
  - Not just a design issue
  - Industry infrastructure issue
  - Myths abound about difficulty and cost
  - Consumers not demanding universal design

Why we need it

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- Number of households with disability present will double between 2000 to 2050
- Conservatively, new home built today:
  - 60% probability disability present in household
  - 91% probability home will have visitor or resident with a disability
  - Disability population statistics misleading

Smith, S K, Rayer, S, & Smith EA. (2008) Ageing and Disability: Implications for the Housing Industry and Housing Policy in the United States. In *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 74:3, 289-306

Terminology confusion

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- Language and terminology is holding us back
- We aren't all talking about the same idea when we say universal, accessible, adaptable, visitable, or even 'disabled' design
- Language is still centred on segregation – housing for 'us' and housing for 'them'

Myths about cost

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- Construction cost 1-2% more to change existing floor plans of mass market homes
- Cost almost nothing if done from start
- Builders still think

  ‘normal’ vs ‘special’

  so therefore

  it must cost more

It's about the 'others'

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"It won't happen to me" logic

Disability, accidents, illness and frailty from ageing happen to others

That's why they need separate stuff

And in any case…

"I'll worry about it when the time comes"

Why we don't have UD?

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Simplistically -

- Code word for 'disabled' design
- This means grab bars
- Grab bars are ugly
- No thank you.

Arguments against UD are based on existing concepts of 'disabled design'. They are…

Argument 1

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From the perspective of aesthetics:

Disabled design is often unattractive

And unattractive things don't sell

Therefore no-one wants to make it and no-one wants to buy it.

False premise – doesn't need to be ugly

Argument 2

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From the perspective of market demand:

Disability and ageing isn't my business
My business is mainstream market segments
The mainstream market isn't asking for it
Therefore I won't build it.

Premise of ugliness at play here

Argument 3

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From the perspective of difference:

- People with disabilities and older people need places built specially for ‘them’
- And they need to be separate from ‘us’
- And special housing has its own market demographic
- Therefore I will build special places if there is money in it.

False assumption – most want to stay at home

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These arguments are influential
BUT
They are a cover for the real reason:

To protect the cost efficiencies locked into the housing delivery chain

The house building machine

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Property Developers

Regulators

Architects

Builders

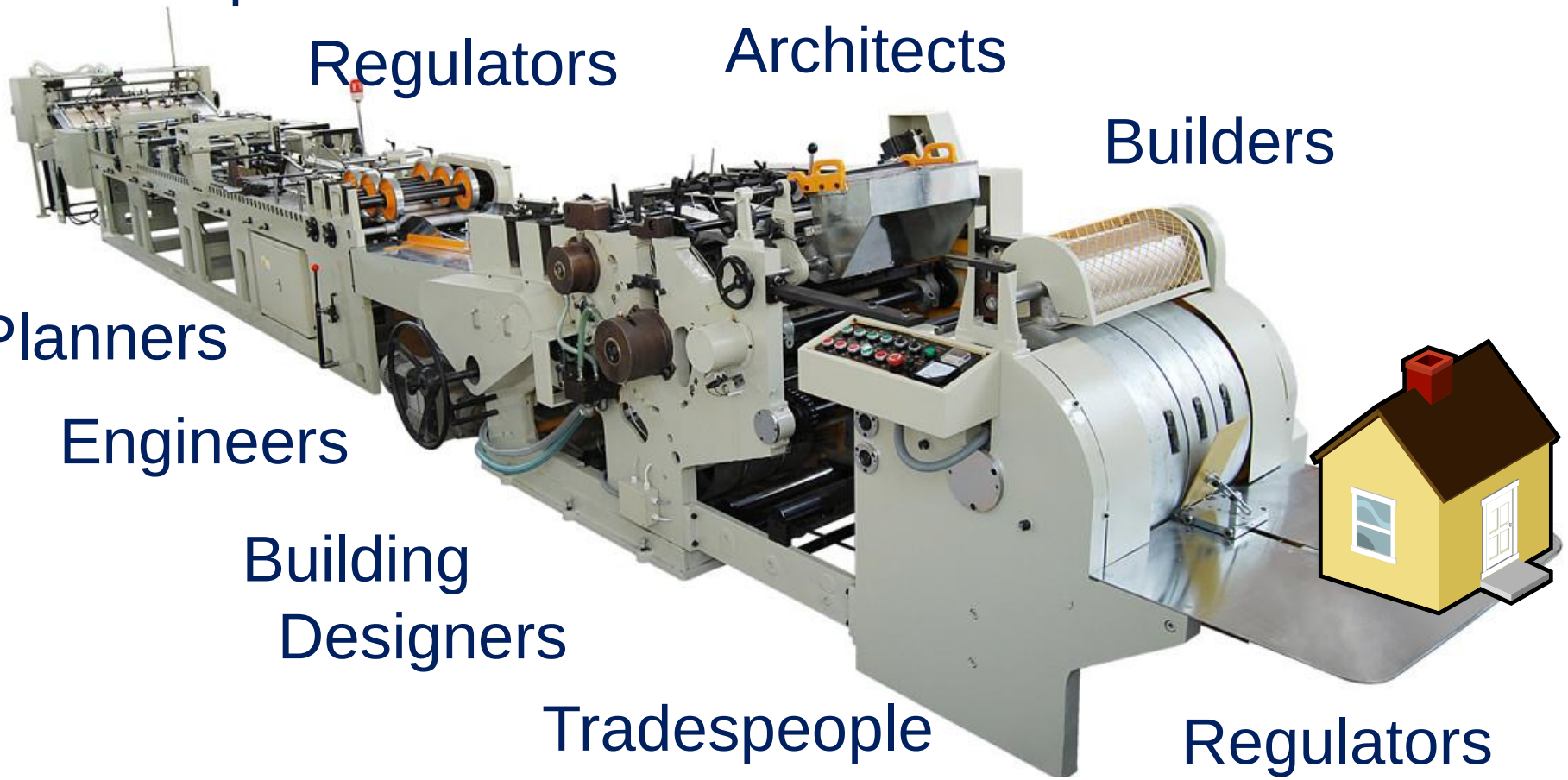
Planners

Engineers

Building Designers

Tradespeople

Regulators



Original photo by wxhongqi@gmail.com guo.oliver@hotmail.com

Housing Delivery Chain

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- A factory-style production line
- But lots of people ‘own’ different parts of the machine
- Lots of reliance on others – no payback or ownership for innovation, but lots of risk
- Works because of tight controls
- Regs keep everyone in line
- Not effective but still efficient

Systems Theory*

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Big machine-like organisations don't change easily

- Tend to look inwards for solutions
- Closed to external feedback: coded 'error variance'
- Tighten internal controls in response to threats
- No point of authority or responsibility
- Causes "one right way" to do things
- Efficiency remains, but effectiveness is lost
- Risk averse – any change is a risk to profits

*Katz & Kahn, (1978). *The social psychology of organisations*

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Which is why industry says…

“It has to be regulated”

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In spite of 85% of industry respondents saying universal design is desirable, almost the same number say nothing will change without legislation.

They are locked into a system they cannot easily change themselves

Alternative Solution?

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- Change the UD paradigm
  from user perspective (the design itself)
  to the planning perspective
- Has been done in Norway*
- Deals with philosophy, the thinking process
- Becomes everyone's responsibility
- Solves issue of many types of housing
- Simplifies the system

*See O.R. Bringa (2001, 2007) for more on Norway

Norway's Action Plan

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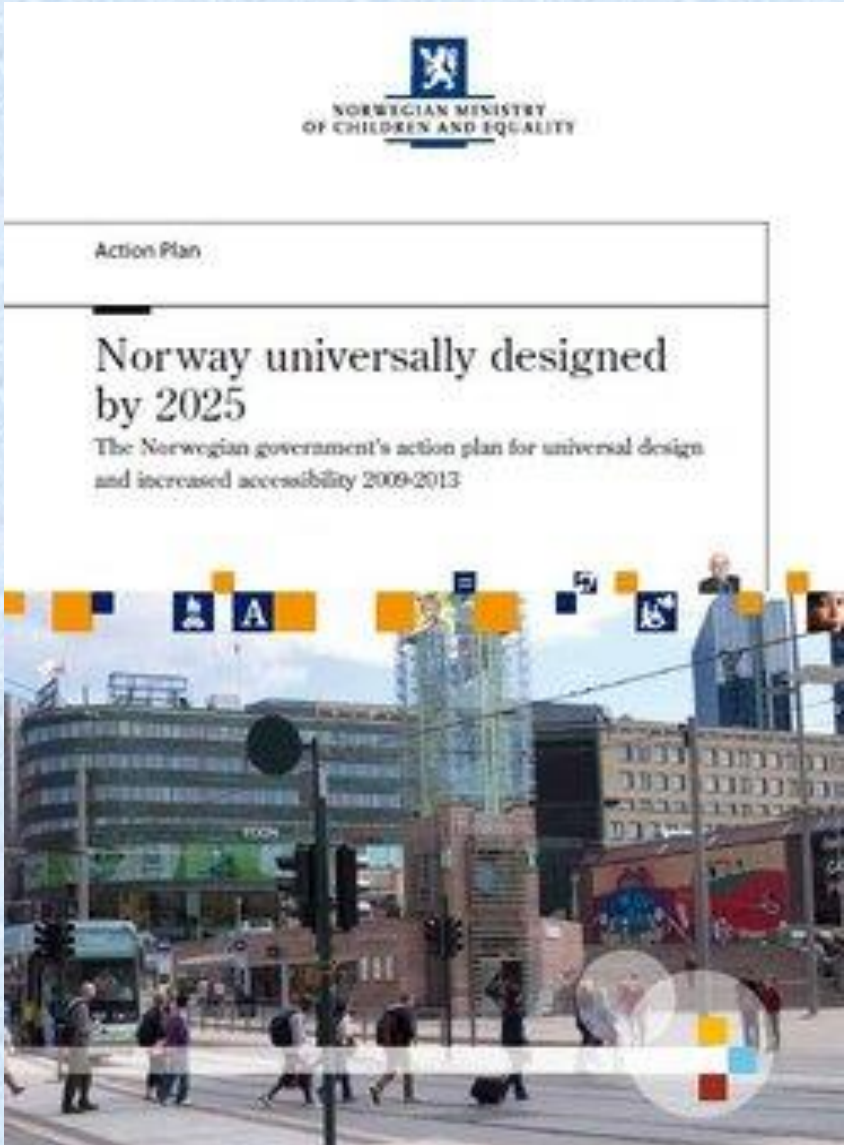
1. Building and construction
2. Planning and outdoor areas
3. Transport
4. Information and Communications Technology



All change is difficult, but…

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- Industry locked into system
- Can't change easily
- Appeal to external umpire – the regulators
- Consequence – lots of policies, regulations
- Need to cut through with simpler solution
- Go back to start, think again from an inclusive policy and planning perspective, not separate solutions

Thank you!

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