

Edited Transcript

Universal Design Conference

Sydney Town Hall (Lower)

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Day 2

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TOURSIM

Session Chair: Ian Day

John Evernden: Universal Design in Tourism - Put the Kettle on!

Synopsis: John outlines some of the simple things that can make travel and touring more inclusive and convenient for everyone, and how simple things such as being able to fit the electric jug under the tap at the hand basin are important considerations for everyone.

IAN DAY: John Evernden is an accredited disability access consultant and has a degree in civil engineering and a Bachelor of Science in ecotourism.

JOHN EVERNDEN: Universal design in tourism - well, it can be any one of a million different things. I believe there are three categories of universal design: one, inventions or ideas that have been adopted universally in their original concept - for example, red, yellow and green traffic lights and Braille, although there are various adaptations to Braille, the initial Braille is an international form of reading. It has the same cell size and shape across the world. The second category is inventions or ideas that have been adapted from their original concept. For example, the wheel and the telescope. Galileo did not invent the telescope, but he used the principle of magnification to develop a telescope through which he could study the stars and planets. In order to finance his studies, he invited the Doge of Venice to the bell tower in St Mark's Square, from where they had a close-up view of the ships in the harbour. As a maritime city, Venice relied on overseas trade, but its ships were under threat from the Turks, so Galileo sold his idea to the Doge on the basis that the Venetian ship captains would be able to see the enemy two hours before they themselves were spotted if they used a telescope.

In promoting the various adaptations of the telescope, Galileo probably became one of our earliest universal designers. Magnification has allowed tourists to visit places that are accessible across a distance, terrain and ecological sensitivity and allowed people with a mobility disability to get closer to places they usually are not able to access.

In this past week, scientists at the Australian National University announced that they'd built a microscope that provides a magnification 20 times larger than any other existing device and allows viewing of the most minuscule organisms. It has many uses and it's a good example of an invention that has been adapted for universal use. We have radio telescope, periscopes, binoculars and of course the microscope.

Earlier in history of course we had the invention of the wheel, which really made tourism accessible, particularly if you had another three. The motor vehicle and then as a classic example of an invention that has been adapted for universal use.

The third category I believe is innovations, inventions and ideas that could or should be universally adapted or adopted. They include motels, tactile bank notes, public toilets, signage and public

domain features. This is probably something that Dr Craddock would refer to as user-inspired basic research and evidence-based recommendations. This year my wife and I have travelled extensively on business trips and on holidays and we've stayed in 18 different motels in New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria, Northern Territory and New Zealand. I made a note of several items that we've come across that are important for older people like ourselves and for people with disability. The first thing we struck when we came to the motel room was the door and how heavy it was to push open, and then hold open. So invariably my wife had to hold the door open while I struggled in with the luggage.

It can't be too hard - I know all doors are required to have a closer under the BCA, but it can't be too hard to adjust that closer for easy opening and gentle closing. Sometimes the doors close so suddenly that they became a danger for a person with a mobility disability or a smaller child who could easily be knocked over.

Once inside the room, we looked for the luggage racks and invariably we found one in the twin bedroom. This is about one and a half. But most of the rooms we only found one luggage rack. Sometimes the room had a spare in the cupboard, but mostly they only had one. So I put my wife's bag on the luggage rack and mine was on the floor, which is quite an imposition for some older people and some people with disabilities.

The third thing we looked at when we arrived is the evacuation plan and it's usually on the back of the door in a dark alcove, often high, often very difficult to read, and in this particular case the evacuation plan shows the floor plan of the entire complex. I'm not sure why you need to read that when you're trying to get out in a hurry.

I believe that evacuation plans should be unique to a particular room or location and should direct you to the nearest exit. You should not be required to study a plan when you're trying to get out in a hurry. You can see in the picture that's in a dark alcove, it's only illuminated because of the flash of my camera.

The first thing I do, or next thing I do when I go into a room, is to make a cup of tea. I get the kettle and take it into the bathroom and lo and behold I can't get the kettle under the tap. So I fill it up with a glass. Now, this is okay if you have the ability. If you have some other physical disability or dementia or arthritis, for example, it's not easy to hold a glass while you're pouring it into the kettle, you splash on the floor, the floor becomes slippery, you create a hazard.

It can't be too hard for motels and hotels to provide a higher tap, a deeper basin or at least fit the kettle to the dimensions of the sink.

I've canvassed these opinions with other people on an 18-day tour we did, 50 people, most of whom were over 60, actually. We talked about these issues during the tour. They all thought they were worthwhile pursuing because they all had similar problems in filling the kettle, lifting the luggage on to the rack, or whatever. I asked the tour guide what problem did she have in her travels and she replied "Oh, please, a light over the bed". After a long, hard day of organising and managing a large tour group, it was her custom to have dinner, have a shower and jump into bed and do her log, make telephone calls and prepare for the next day. Only two of the 18 motel rooms that we stayed in had

a light above the bed.

I've written to two hotel chains so far suggesting they might consider these five issues when developing or renovating their hotels. I've already had a response from one of the hotel managers saying that he will attack the door problem immediately.

The next issue I'd like to talk about is tactile bank notes. You can find this photograph on the world wide web. This lady is Alexandra Lancaster. She's petitioning the Government on behalf of her 12-year-old son who is blind. The Reserve Bank of Australia is currently looking at redesigning our bank notes, the first time since the 1980s. It has been put to them we should have some sort of tactile identification on the notes so that we can identify the different denominations.

There are many countries throughout the world which have some form of tactile recognition on the different bank notes. There is one major bank in Europe which declined to put Braille on their new bank notes on the basis that not many people are learning Braille these days. Well, that claim may be true, there are still a lot of people who do read Braille and are still learning Braille, but it ignores the fact that a lot of other people who don't read Braille need to have some sort of tactile identification of the denominations. People are getting old tend to lose their vision a bit, obviously people who are blind, people who are deaf/blind, people who are deaf/blind are particular category. If you are blind and have some hearing you can ask what the denomination is, if you're deaf/blind, you can't ask because you can't hear the answer. Obesity can lead to diabetes, which leads to diabetic retinopathy and in turn can lead to vision or blindness. Such tactile reading would be of benefit for many people in their own currency as well as when they travel overseas.

One of the most universal needs of all is to have easily accessible public toilets when travelling for people of all ages and abilities. This first one, these two toilets are large enough to be fully accessible. The sign says accessible toilets LH - LH means that the toilets have a left-hand transfer from the wheelchair on to the pan. Unfortunately, the two toilets are exactly the same and as you can see from this photograph it's not a left-hand transfer but a right-hand transfer because you need your right hand to help yourself on to the seat.

These two toilets, one is male, one is female. They're also in a New South Wales country town at a tourist destination. The female one has the toilet in one corner and the male has the toilet in the other corner. Both cubicles are large enough to be compliant with Australian Standards.

One of the hotels that we stayed in on our 18-day tour of the outback earlier this year had a male and female accessible toilet off the foyer. When you're on a coach tour, one of the important things to do is to be on time for the bus because the bus driver is often on a schedule and you need to leave at the allotted time. All the guests assembled in the foyer, we had to leave on the bus at 6 o'clock in the morning. At 1 minute to 6 the male toilet was empty and there's a line-up outside the female toilet. Now, in each of these three cases, the first two I came across were those doing work for go outback councils and the third one I came across was on this tour.

In the reports to the two councils and in a letter to the manager of this particular hotel I pointed out that if you have two toilets which are large enough to be accessible, make them unisex accessible toilets. The manager of the hotel has written back and he said "Look, your idea about putting in

instead of male and female unisex accessible toilets is fantastic. He said 'I'm going to convert to the two toilets into fully accessible unisex accessible toilets. The first thing I'll do is put a sign on both doors saying unisex accessible toilets so the buses won't be delayed'. He thought that was a good idea.

Wayfinding. When you go to Canberra, if you drive down Northbourne Avenue you are alerted to the name of the next coming up street because halfway down the block you'll find the name of the next street. Driving around Sydney and around the State, you often find the situation where you have the names of intersecting streets at the same level on the same pole. If you're a pedestrian you can read them; if you're a driver, you need to slow down or turn the corner in order to read the other sign. If you slow down, you potentially cause a hazard to other drivers, vehicles behind you, or to pedestrian. Maybe the pedestrian on the kerb thinks you've slowed down to let them across and they walk in front of your car. It can't be too hard to place one below the other. I've written to the State Minister for Roads and Ports suggesting he might take up this idea with the local councils and other road authorities that they at least put one sign below the other.

Here in Sydney, I was on the access committee for 17 years. In 1990, Sydney City Council decided to replace its many different street signs with one sign white on green background. Now, the signs are quite attractive, but as you know, you find them on a wall, sometimes on an awning, sometimes you find the street name on the footpath and sometimes the sign is there and it's very difficult to find anyway.

So when council decided to replace its street signs, they came up with the idea of providing a tactile street sign for people who cannot read those signs on the wall or the awning or anywhere else. I worked with the Association of Blind Citizens New South Wales to develop this sign. It's a rubber sign. It has the street name and the property numbers in embossed letters and in gold lettering and the same message in Braille. This was back in 1990.

So at that time rubber was being recycled, we came up with the idea of using the rubber sign. We decided to put it on the traffic poles adjacent to the audio tactile button. So that's the cue. You find the audio tactile button and you'll always find the sign. It's on the right-hand side of the pole as you face the kerb. So as if you're reading the sign from the right hand, you read from top to bottom, and you know that you're facing in this case Clarence Street and you'll know that the property in front of which you're standing is number 239 and the property number 171 is to your left, L. At the other end of the block in Clarence Street, the sign would read Clarence Street 171-239 R, so the following number is to your right.

Although these signs were developed initially for people who are blind or have other vision impairments, we've since found they've been of great benefit to people who have speech or hearing impediments because they can't ask for directions or hear the answer, so it has given them a sense of being able to get around on their own. Having the Braille there is also useful for people, international visitors, because, as I said, Braille is an international form of reading.

One problem is we can only put them on a pole where there is a cue like the audio tactile button. People with vision impairment don't walk along the street feeling all the different signs, but they're alerted to this particular sign.

So the other thing that is important is the standardisation, they're always adjacent to the audio tactile button, centred around the button so it's always waist to chest height so you can read it if you're a short person like myself, you're in a wheelchair. If you're short you can't see over the people in front of you. It's good for children. Because you'll always find them near the audio tactile button, they're at a common location at street intersections.

This is an idea that could potentially be taken up around the world. We were told at the time that it was a world first back in 1990, 1991 - maybe it was, maybe it wasn't. If it was, it's still a good idea.

I know other cities around Australia are looking at tactile signs. Sydney's signs have got the black on the silver or the black on the white that gives a good contrast. Earlier this year I went to the low-vision conference in Melbourne and speaker after speaker talked about the contrast, how necessary the contrast was so people could actually read a sign or at least get some depth perception so if they come into a park, for example, and there's a black seat on a light-coloured pathway, they know where the end of the seat is. If it's a brown seat on a brown pathway, they can actually miss the seat. So colour, contrast is important for depth perception and also actually reading the sign.

Just going back to Mr Galileo, I mentioned that he took the Doge to the top of the bell tower to look at the ships in the harbour. Perhaps we might take a leaf out of his book and take our government members to the top of the bell tower, not to throw them off but to say "look, here are the opportunities in front of you". Thank you.

IAN DAY: Questions please.

DELEGATE: I'm an architect and a mother of an 18 month-old with a pram. I'd like to know your views about our iconic building the harbour bridge not being accessible.

JOHN EVERNDEN: In 1932 I don't think accessibility was on anyone's agenda. I know that the bridge climb people do take people with disabilities up there. It's very difficult. I know if you take the walk, all the walkers are chained together. It's difficult if you have a mobility disability. I'm not sure if I can answer your question directly, but I know from personal experience that it's rather difficult to make the bridge climb accessible.

MARK RELF: I can probably respond and say that the Roads and Maritime Services in the Sydney Harbour Foreshores are already looking at installing a lift from the rocks up on to the pedestrian walkway.

DELEGATE: The question I would like to ask is about the whole business of, if tourists are coming to Sydney, one of the things that they need is an accessible means of public transport. Having spent the last six years in Europe living in various big cities, all of those cities have one, two or three different means of accessible tourism transport for everybody with disabilities or the aged. Sydney does not have these opportunities. Therefore, we have a significant problem in terms of attracting tourists when there is no way of them being able to move around. What are the views of our panel to how we address these problems in the City of Sydney?

BILL FORRESTER: Transport is one of the critical issues. Australia, in my view, is probably 10 to 15 years behind where Europe is and even the most difficult transport network in the world, which would be the London underground, because every tunnel is a different size, there's a multitude of trains. They have an accessibility plan in place now to have the whole network accessible by 2020. Further than that right now, which you don't get in Melbourne or Sydney, you've got a complete accessibility map for those stations that are and all of the interchanges.

Melbourne have announced they're going to do the Frankston Line with raised platforms and easy access, but we're a long way behind. Again, in Melbourne it's only the CBD. Sydney has a long way to go, in my opinion. It is the premier destination for Australia for most inbound tourists and you've just seen Australia doesn't accept accessible tourism. I'll couch that by saying that even in the current tourism plan put out by Austrade, accessible tourism is not there. So it's a round-about answer to your question.

JOHN EVERNDEN: I work with a lot of councils and I encourage them to make a survey of their bus stops, for example. In 2006 the former Disability Commissioner, Graeme Innes, wrote to every council in New South Wales saying look, we have the Disability Standards for Accessible Public Transport 2002 to 2022, it's about time we did something about it. If you haven't made your bus stops accessible, at least do a survey. Now, I know for a fact that many councils have not done a survey. They're reluctant to - some outer councils are reluctant to make their bus stops accessible because they say "Look, the bus operators decide where the bus stop goes and because these are developing areas, they may not need the bus stop here next week, they might need it down another street." So a lot of councils are a bit reluctant to spend the money, not that they have much money anyway.

One of the things I suggest to local councils, at least if you have a bus stop where there is grass, dig up the grass and plant some concrete. At least you're halfway there. That's something you can do under your maintenance program.