

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

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

Coming from a family of builders, George's father and brother built a home for him some time ago. However, his current house was built using a project home builder. George sustained a spinal cord injury more than twenty years ago and he begins his story after leaving the rehabilitation hospital to go home to a room and bathroom created by his father with the design help of the hospital's occupational therapist (OT):

"I came out of hospital and went to a normal standard house. The room that was added was naturally added by my dad, but it was just a copy of a hospital room, it was really horrible ... it wasn't really pleasant. But that was by advice of the OT at the time.

As soon as he was able, he built another room and bathroom that were more to his liking and without some of the occupational therapist's recommendations:

"I learned since then that I don't need that. So the house that I built next had a bathroom that looked like any other bathroom and a house that looked like any other house in the street. My room looked like any other room – everything was accessible without making it look silly."

Later, George built another house with his father and brother, but due to circumstances and events did not move into it. Given past experiences with family members, George and his wife decided to build their new home with a project home builder. They thought their experience within the building industry would help them, but this was not the case:

"My wife and I shopped around for a project home ... we thought it would be easy, but we found it a lot more difficult than we imagined"

The first hurdle was gaining access into the display home sales offices, and the second was being dismissed as genuine purchasers. Having suffered discrimination in many quarters in the past, George did not take this attitude lightly:

"...and the attitude from the sales team was that of, well, he's not going to buy house – a good house – it was just a horrible attitude, and they just didn't want to talk to me, but they wanted to talk to the person behind me who had gold bracelets and a jacket and whatever. So that put a big black spot on it, but even then, I kept on going back. ... Later on when I drove up and I was dressed properly and I told my wife to put on all her gold and make up and everything, they wanted to talk to us then, and I told them I wasn't going to deal with them, and I told them why."

Sales staff also fell into the trap of assuming George was not capable of speaking for himself:

“[They] gave me such a hard time with their attitude. The person who makes the decisions on building in our family is me. And they should be talking to me and not to go right past me and start talking to my wife asking, what does he need? They can ask me. That irks me.”

Eventually they found a project home builder who was sympathetic to their requirements and claimed to have built for other people with disability. George felt they were prepared to listen and accommodate his requirements. Overall he felt most of the home designs were spatially suitable, but the details caused problems, such as the ten to fifteen millimetre step into tiled wet areas, because the builder was reluctant to make the floor levels flush:

“For some unknown reason, ninety-nine percent of the houses that we saw in the display homes, if not all of them, had a step in and out of the bathrooms. ... That was a headache, just to ratify that even though I know the solution’s easy. They should have it as standard.”

George gave way to the builder on this issue, mainly because he knows there are two solutions to the problem – either create a set down in the slab for the wet areas, or build the main floor up to the same level as the wet areas, and for George “in this particular instance, the argument wasn’t worth it” so he agreed to raise the floor covering using battens, which was at his expense. There was a similar issue with access to the outdoor living area and the front entry, both of which George solved in a similar way to the wet areas – by adding decking. However, this was not his preferred option, which was a tiled alfresco:

“I’m going to have decking added to it which will be in line. You know, I could have had tiles if the floor was going to be the right height, but they won’t do it.”

As George chose a two storey home, he required a through-floor elevator, but the builder would not allow other contractors on site during construction. Consequently, the elevator will be installed after handover. The one feature about which George was not prepared to compromise was the garage and internal entry from the garage into the house. George understood the inconvenience for the builder and the issues around the efficiencies of mass produced housing, but this became an issue of equity with other homeowners:

“This was an argument I almost didn’t win, but in the end they decided they will ramp to my garage [doorway to the house] and they will build it at their own cost. It came to a head ... they were telling me things are impossible when they are not. “

The builder could not see why George wanted level entry into the house from the garage – they said he could use the front door. However, George was adamant that he was entitled to utilise his garage in the same way as his neighbours:

“And I said no. I want to be able to do what everybody else is entitled to do, get out of my car, in the dry, and get into the house, in the dry. I don’t want to be excluded, I don’t want to use the back door, I don’t want to use a side door, I want be like everybody else.”

George was clearly determined to achieve the same kind of equitable access to his own home as he would expect in the public domain so when the builder inferred that one level entry was sufficient, George was unwavering in his response, particularly as the slope of the land posed no problems:

“You know, it was difficult for them to say, oh your rear entry will be perfectly flat – no, I don’t care – my guests aren’t going to start going through the back door. I’m a stickler and I gave them a hard time, but we were very fortunate that we were able to put this property on our land at a certain level which made the rear entry accessible and the front entry accessible just with landscaping.”

There were many other issues that stemmed from the builder’s failure to understand that being a wheelchair user does not preclude a person from undertaking the simplest of everyday tasks, such as accessing the electrical switch box. George also felt that the builders thought that he should have some sort of detachment to the house. It was “very difficult to make them understand that I’m interested in the house, and it’s **my** house – I don’t care. It’s **my** house!”

Similarly to Mike, George experienced some difficulties with local council regulators. Some of the issues related to caveats within the development site, such as the style and set-back for the garage so that a living area is more prominent at the front of the house. As George pointed out, councils know the dimensions of a public accessible parking space, so he would need a similar size for his garage:

“Boy did I have to jump through hoops. Even though the builder said it would [cost more] I said I’ve got to be able to get out of my car otherwise it is a pointless garage. ... Then I had a council fight when they said the proportion of my garage frontage was greater than whatever – it’s a visual thing.”

After a lot of work and persistence George eventually succeed in arguing that the garage would not visually dominate the house. George said the builder was supposed to be representing him in council issues, but their approach was an unconvincing letter saying their client was in a wheelchair without any further elaboration. When council refused the design changes, the builder acquiesced. Consequently George ended up dealing with council himself:

“I gave them all the tools, all the firearms the needed [and] they wrote a letter, oh, our client is in a wheelchair, needs disability access, thanks very much, but that was the end of it – and it’s more than that – it has to be elaborated. And the builder said, I told you so, and I said no, I’m not going to stop there ... I’ll sort it out and I did. I know councils have got regulations, but it was very difficult to bend them a bit.”

As part of his job, George visits other wheelchair users in their own homes and we discussed the various features he has observed over time. He had occasion to visit a large multi-unit development in a northern suburb of Sydney, and was deeply impressed with the design:

“It was brilliantly wheelchair accessible... and I thought, wow, this is the pinnacle of what I think a house should be built like ... when you went into the apartments there were no steps. They had alfresco and balconies absolutely dead level. The bathrooms were accessible – no monkey bars or anything, but were user friendly to me ... everything – it was unbelievable! ... If I didn’t have a disability I would live there – you can’t say this is for a disabled person – it’s built for the general public.”

Small tasks most people take for granted were designed with everyone in mind, such as being able to test the temperature of the water in the shower before entering, and for George this was wonderful:

“You could switch on the water ... without getting wet, feel with your hand, yeah, water temperature’s right. It’s good to know that such a big project can be done and cater for everyone. So why can’t project home builders do the same?”

George highlighted that the technical expertise and design ideas are readily available and being used, but not in project homes. I raised the lack of generalisation – the issue that builders are not transferring experience of disability in their personal lives into their professional lives and home designs. George then related a story of his builder-father. Although his father was obviously aware that George is a wheelchair user, he was not necessarily giving it consideration at every turn. When George was building the first house after his accident he wanted to include a granny flat:

“I was building a granny flat for my grandmother at the time and I said, what’s this step we’re going to have here, and my dad said oh, you know, it’s only one little step. I said, dad, I’m in a wheelchair! Ah yeah, but it’s for your grandmother. Dad, [voice rises] I don’t give a stuff – I want to be able to go into my own house. Now fix the bastard up. I couldn’t believe it – my own dad!”

George explained that the bathroom, set out by his brother, also had to be changed because of thoughtlessness. This experience demonstrates that being a builder with a family member who uses a wheelchair does not guarantee integrated thinking about the issues involved:

“Yeah, and that’s family and they are aware and they just think, oh well, he’s not going in there, it’s for his grandmother, and all of a sudden, all those ideas about accessibility go out the window.”

Coming from a building family George clearly understood the delivery chain efficiencies in mass market housing. However, he felt that just a few small changes to the way things were done would make a significant difference to wheelchair users overall, and that also means convenience for everyone who has a mobility problem. Towards the end of the interview I asked George what was the one thing he would persuade project home builders to change. George returned to the theme of level access throughout the home and to outdoor areas:

“One thing that all project home builders should do is get the basics right, which is, there’s no need for that little step into – whether it’s a single storey building, a two storey building – into the bathrooms and into the buildings themselves. Personally, I think that should be a design feature which is incorporated into the design of the building – it can be done, but it has to be engineered, drawn up before it’s actually made into a thousand homes.”

Summary: A fight to the end

George’s story is one of unfulfilled promises. They chose a project home builder who initially agreed to make minor changes to the standard house design, but ultimately it was George who compromised, particularly when he could see a way to solve the problem himself, for example utilising decking and flooring to create level access throughout. However, on the issue of garage entry and garage size, he was not willing to compromise as it required structural change that he could not overcome with his own solutions. This then became more than just a design issue, it became one of equity and discrimination. George’s exasperation was exacerbated because he knew more than the average purchaser about home construction techniques and the design solutions available. The one thing he would like to see changed in project homes is level access to wet areas as standard, and more flexibility in creating level access for all outdoor areas. George’s experience with Council, similarly to Mike, is the lack of willingness to consider any solution that is outside the strict application of policies. However, in both cases, after much persistence, Council allowed the minor changes that made a considerable difference to achieving a well-designed home.

Jane Bringolf, 2015. From *Barriers to Universal Design in Housing*, 2011, University of Western Sydney.