

## **A WHEELCHAIR USER'S PERSPECTIVE ON BUILDING A NEW HOME: MIKE'S STORY**

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

Mike and his wife spent some time researching project homes and discovered they required significant adjustments to suit their requirements. When the cost and difficulties were factored in, as well as the uncertainty of achieving their aims, they decided to engage an architect. As they planned to stay in the house long term, they felt they could justify the extra expense to ensure their requirements were met:

“Having been in a chair for approximately ten years, I truly understood the value of getting it right and what a difference it makes. We will get exactly what we want and won't have to compromise on a door width or a hallway width.”

They found an architect who claimed to have experience in designing for people with disability, but this was not altogether advantageous. Mike felt it was very difficult to communicate with the architect who behaved as if he could tell his client what he needed. Mike is a very active person and has lived in many different situations, and he knew exactly what he wanted. He told the architect, “I know what I need and despite your experience and good intentions, I can't accept that you can actually tell me what I need.” He felt the architect would be good for someone who was newly injured and had little experience of what they might require, but he felt many of the features incorporated by the architect were not needed:

“My problem was actually scaling that back and saying, I'm looking for a house that is very accessible, but it's done so in a very subtle manner. I don't need large rails. I don't need all these things.”

Mike claimed it was difficult for the architect to understand and he had to continually reinforce his role as the client and as a person with experience with building features. Eventually they came to an understanding and the architect was able to offer ideas that were advantageous, such as a comfortable and accessible outdoor living space. The main difficulties arose when it came to the details. For the money they were outlaying, Mike felt they should have all the details exactly as they wanted them. He was astonished, therefore, when the architect showed him drawings of an inaccessible space:

“And the architect drew in a powder room in the house, like a bathroom. And I said, what's that? [The architect said] That's a powder room. I said I

couldn't get in there and close the door and use that thing. [The architect said] Oh, but it wouldn't be for you, and I thought, why would I build a house with a room I can't get in? ... I have the opportunity to have a one hundred percent accessible house – why compromise and incorporate something that's not.”

After explaining how he and his wife worked directly with the cabinet-maker on the detailed drawings of the kitchen, bathroom and laundry, Mike explained that once all the completed drawings were with Council for approval, they terminated the services of the architect and found a builder with whom they could communicate better:

“Looking back on that – the best decision we ever made – we got a builder we liked, very good, very thorough and we found that relationship with the builder took out the middle man and the architect, and the builder had very practical ideas.”

Mike regularly met with the builder on site and together they discussed design ideas and weighed up the costs. He felt that the key to success was to work with the person who was going to carry out the task, and not pass the message on: “The builder was of the same opinion – let's solve this together. [He had] a lot of good ideas that worked out really well for us”. The need to be very clear in explaining what he wanted was emphasised – that flat means flush:

“...not kinda flat-ish. Flat is when you roll a marble and it goes straight through. Once he got it – I mean flat – he said, OK fine. He was wise enough to think, let's do it properly the first time.”

The builder had not embarked on such a project previously, and as the building progressed, Mike believed the builder gradually began to appreciate the importance of accessibility throughout the house and the subtle ways in which it could be achieved. He went on to explain particular features that could not be described as “features for a person in a wheelchair”, rather they were just good design. For example, drawers instead of cupboards in the kitchen, a lower section of kitchen bench that is also a breakfast bar, and an induction cooktop that allows knee access below. Mike felt the builder began to enjoy the challenge of creating solutions. He wanted the designs to be:

“...smart and clever – I didn't want clunky. A ramp going from here to there because it was just the easiest thing to do – that's not OK. Let's stretch out the gradient and reduce it by being smart about it. And he was good like that. At times I think he almost enjoyed the challenge too.”

Owning a home that looked good and did not look as if it was specifically for a wheelchair user was an important factor for Mike, and was pleased his friends could see that the design is comfortable and functional for anyone:

“The amount of people who come to the house and say, it’s just so flat and easy to get around and easy to move through – and it is, right from the front footpath right through the front door [to the patio at the back]. They glide or flow through the whole house. And I’m talking friends my own age who haven’t even thought about it. Friends who live in two storey homes, they say, this is really nice to move through – they like the single level, the flow, how easy it is, not up and down stairs or tiny nooks and crannies – things like that.”

Mike described many of the design details of his home and how they had increased his ability to carry out simple day to day tasks such as doing the laundry and cooking a meal. His new-found level of domestic independence was empowering:

“It’s the ease of day to day living activities, on many levels. Having been able bodied before my accident, many of the activities are more difficult. The key parts, like the laundry, are key parts to independence, but by having the environment that accommodates them all, it ... significantly reduces that difficulty in a task. So doing my laundry myself is the same as my wife. There’s no added challenge because you’re in a chair – it kinda levels the playing field – it brings you back – like it’s empowering and it’s pleasing.”

The other issue he raised was how smart and thoughtful design can make the difference to creating that level of empowerment:

“You know, you’ve had a set back by the disability, but then again you’ve made that ground up through some smart design – it kinda brings you back to neutral rather than set back with the disability - the environment is not very accommodating – so you’re constantly kind of stuck there in this – [exasperated sigh] – there is no way I can get back, whereas I think the smart design brings you back to even.”

The local council regulators caused some problems for Mike and it took a year to resolve them. He felt there was a rigid adherence to policies without any consideration for issues not covered by the policy document, such as grading the landscaping to avoid the need for steps. Council required retention of stormwater in the front of the house so that in a major downpour of rain, water would be retained and released slowly into the street. However, with a relatively flat block and level entry into the home, Council were concerned about drainage away from the house. Although this was a frustrating problem in itself, Mike found the attitude of council staff added more frustration because of the time it had taken to

come to a solution. Eventually Mike met the council stormwater engineer on site to explain the issues and finally the situation was understood:

“... they really weren’t interested in considering another reason or what makes sense for this situation other than ‘what does my policy say?’ ... By the end of it all ... the gentleman who actually came to the house said, oh that’s fine, it’s fine, fine, no problems. I thought, I’ve been butting heads with you for almost a year because of this. ... He came to the house – I met him in the chair. He could like, get it. Once he saw me and could see what we were trying to do ... it was like the penny dropped. But when it was him in his office our builder would call him on the phone, having the stormwater engineer re-doing the plans – there was a disconnect – he couldn’t kinda - get it.”

As Mike raised the issue of “a disconnect”, I asked whether he thought a connection had been made between public and home environments. He thought the connection had not been made and this was because industry has a particular way of doing things and that change is not readily accepted by either builders or council staff:

“It’s that mindset of kinda scared of change, or I don’t want to be the first to be doing this. From the builder’s perspective – I’ll just keep on doing it the same as everyone else.”

At the end of the interview I asked if he thought anyone moving in with a family would want to change anything in his house. After a pause he said it was unlikely as he couldn’t think of anything that was branded or stereotyped as ‘disabled’. He also made the point that good design is just that, good design, and therefore good for everyone:

“There is a normal shower, just larger than a normal shower, a normal bathtub, but with a hob at the top that is a little wider. Under all the sinks, they have a slight cut out so I can roll in forwards whereas in a typical home they would just have cupboards or drawers. There’s not one rail, there’s not a bench, there’s not ... [pause]. Apart from right at the back fence where there’s the patio – and even that – it’s just a short ramp, which anyone could have anyway, say I wanted to roll a wheelbarrow down there. Friends come round and look and say, oh it’s so easy – why don’t we have drawers? Why do I dig into cupboards when it doesn’t need to be so? There’s a lot of crossover there – I think that’s what’s often missed as well, if it’s branded or stereotyped as ‘disabled’ design or alteration, maybe it’s less appealing rather than being common sense to have a kitchen full of drawers and everything comes to you. So it adds a lot of value to the regular user. There’s nothing that’s like oh, of course, there’s a rail in the bathroom.”

**Summary: It's just a really nice house**

Mike is a physically active person who expects to have the same level of independent functioning at home as any other person in society. His home is a reflection of this desire: it looks like any other home yet also accommodates a wheelchair user. He was clearly pleased that his friends were complementary about the design and they realised the convenience of items such as drawers instead of cupboards in the kitchen. Mike did not use a project home builder because the cost of changes to design and the lack of confidence that their design changes would be carried out satisfactorily. He described a difficult time with the architect who tried to impose his ideas, and a local government regulator who was blindly applying a policy without fully understanding the situation. However, he found a hands-on builder who was prepared to rise to the challenges and solve problems as they arose.

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