

# Why do we need universal design features in all new housing?

Jane Bringolf

Centre for Universal Design Australia

## Abstract

Australian mass market housing design has changed little in the last fifty years. While facades change with fashions the structural and spatial elements remain the same. Through community advocacy efforts, the body that regulates the National Construction Code was brought to the negotiating table to discuss mandating basic access features in all new homes. Features under consideration are those in the existing voluntary code for universal design in housing.

The house-building sector consists of many parts that are held together by regulations, professional codes and norms of practice. The certainty and consistency they provide underpin cost efficiencies across the sector. Consequently, regulation to adapt the existing housing code would ensure cost efficiencies are maintained. Nevertheless, industry continues to press their case for the status quo.

Amendments to the National Construction Code are decided by designated government ministers from each state, territory and the Commonwealth Government. Ultimately they will make the decision. Evidence and politics will be factored into the final decision. While industry advocates for their position, advocacy groups believe there is sufficient evidence to show that basic access features will benefit all Australians.

## Introduction

The features under consideration are easy to implement, and largely cost neutral, but the housing industry is campaigning for the status quo. The two Royal Commissions related to [aged care](#) and [disability care](#) found that inaccessible housing prevented people from remaining at home and living independently.

The Building Better Homes [campaign](#) is about mandating access features in all new homes. It's also about creating resilient, flexible and sustainable housing. These features will increase general amenity and allow people to age in place. For people with a disability, it will allow them to live independently.

Of course, most people resist change. This resistance is sometimes founded on misinformation and myths that get perpetuated. Evidence often gets lost in discussion or confused with opinions and anecdotes. Here are some of the questions and misconceptions commonly cited.

## What are these features?

The Building Better Homes campaign is advocating for:

- A level entry into the home, either from an entry door or the car parking space or garage. Good for bikes, prams or moving furniture.
- Level transitions throughout the home, including a step free shower and a toilet on the entry level. Grab bars? No.
- Doorways and corridors to be designed for ease of movement and functional spaces required in the bathroom. Flexibility to arrange things to suit you.

That doesn't sound hard. What's the fuss?

### **Only a few people need it**

It might seem like a few people, but four in ten people have a permanent disability or long term health condition. Most people live in households with their families. Our [census data](#) tells us that over one-third of households (families) include a person with a disability. This figure doubles if we include family members with long term health conditions.

That's a lot of households limited in where and how they can live.

### **I'll worry about it when the time comes**

But how will you, or your loved ones, know when that time has come? Waiting until a health crisis occurs is not the best time to try to renovate or move house. This is when we and our families are at our least able to cope with change. It's like saying I'll wear the seat belt after I have a car crash.

### **Why mandate the features – why not let people choose?**

Asking for the features as a special design costs more. If it is done with every new home the costs are minimised and builders and designers won't get in a muddle. The house-building system is efficient because it has rules, codes and regulation that make sure everyone knows what they are doing. That means fewer costly mistakes.

Few people can imagine what it's like to live with disability and the impacts of ageing. Even fewer know what features they will need "when the time comes".

### **It will cost too much**

Any cost to builders will be in managing the change and they will be given plenty of time to make arrangements with subcontractors. These are not extra features. The aim is to tweak the design so that they are included consistently – that's why regulation in is needed.

Australian homes are some of the largest in the world. More than 70% of all Australian homes are [separate dwellings](#) with an average of 3 bedrooms. That means there is plenty of scope to re-design the space more efficiently for better access and amenity. When it comes to apartments, many of the proposed features are already mandated.

[Economists have estimated](#) that the cost to home buyers could be between \$1,000 and \$7,000 for changes to current floor plans. That's about 1-1.5% of the overall purchase price. Industry has a way of re-organising itself to minimise costs due to regulation. Indeed,

regulation maintains a level playing field and everyone in the supply chain knows what the rules are. What is thought of as special becomes the norm.

Right now, when homeowners need to modify their home after a major health event or serious accident they can find themselves with a bill for thousands of dollars, or an ultimatum to move into residential aged care. The cost of widening the doorways is just the start.

It's likely there will be some costs depending on the creativity of the designer. But they should be considered in context and considered across the lifespan of the home.

### **You can't do it on all sites – some are too steep**

Sometimes there will be individual steep blocks. This is not the norm. Mass market housing is carried out in greenfield sites. It is more efficient for construction people and their plant and equipment if the whole site is relatively level.

Many people currently access their home through their garage. This is the case with underground car parks in apartment blocks with a lift. There will be some exemptions needed on a case by case basis. For example, a knockdown-rebuild on a cliff face.

### **But don't accessible homes look like hospitals?**

Some people associate accessible, or universal design features with hospital-looking designs. The [Livable Housing Design Guidelines](#) show how attractive and unobtrusive access features are. A step-free entry is good for everyone. Think twin prams, furniture delivery, bringing in the shopping and having granny over for dinner.

Access features are not new or special ideas. For example, screen-free showers, wide front doors and master bedroom doors are mainstream. Merging of indoor-outdoor spaces is popular as well as drawer storage in kitchens. But fashions change so there is no consistency.

### **What if a buyer doesn't want these features?**

People often associate these features solely with wheelchair users. Chronic illnesses and sporting accidents happen all the time. Currently some people can't go home from hospital because their home is inaccessible.

Think of it this way. Do you want to put on the seat belt or have air bags installed after your car accident? It is obvious that this is good for everyone so buyers don't have a choice. Changing building practices is outweighed by the cost to society of isolation, injury, avoidable hospital stays and institutionalisation. Not to mention the emotional and physical costs to family members.

### **Why is Gold Level better than Silver level?**

The [proposed changes](#) to the National Construction Code are based on the Silver and Gold levels described in the Livable Housing Design Guidelines.

The objective of the regulatory proposal is to ensure our homes are fit for purpose regardless of our changing needs. The Silver level will not meet this objective. It will allow most people to visit a home, but not stay for an extended time as there is minimal space in the toilet, and no shower or bedroom on the ground floor.

The Dalton/Carter Report found that the Gold level is the most cost effective because it is the most functional for everyone. It's best for our ageing population.

### **Builders say buyers don't ask for access features**

Lack of accessible housing supply is well documented, but individual builders argue that there is no demand. Henry Ford famously said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said 'faster horses'".

Most households needing access features can't afford to build a new home. They are income-poor and have to stay near services and public transport. Some modify their homes with government subsidies, or they just make do.

Builders sell dreams. The sales brochures extol the idea of a grand lifestyle – an improvement on their existing situation. The few people who need accessible housing and can afford a new home are hit with a significant surcharge for managing the new features – not the actual cost of them.

### **Have other countries mandated universal design in housing?**

Japan was the first to act because their population is ageing the fastest, but their incentive approach using a minimum standard has not had the desired outcome. Sweden mandated basic access in the 1970s. Norway has adopted universal design principles in all facets of government. By 2010 it included housing.

The United States apartments funded by the Federal Government are mandated to be accessible. In 1999 the United Kingdom regulated for "visitable" housing. By 2010 their construction code included three levels of access: M1–visitable, M2–accessible and adaptable, and M3–wheelchair user. M1–visitable remained mandatory and M2 and M3 became options to be mandated by individual UK constituencies.

### **Where to from here?**

The [Building Ministers](#) from each state and territory and the Commonwealth will meet in April 2021 to decide whether to adapt the National Construction Code to regulate basic access features in all new housing. While community advocacy groups and individuals sign up to the Building Better Homes campaign, the housing industry continues to press its case for [the status quo](#).