

# From the Ground Up: Establishing a Centre for Universal Design in Australia

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**Abstract.** The universal design movement arrived in Australia well before the turn of the century. A handful of individuals, often working as lone voices, are doing their best to incorporate the concepts into their everyday work and promote the concepts more widely. As is often the case elsewhere, the term “universal design” is misunderstood and confused with special and separate designs for people with disability rather than inclusion for everyone. Compliance to legislated disability access standards has created further confusion and as a consequence many myths about universal design have emerged. Such myths have held back the implementation and understanding of universal design and inclusive practice. Australian governments at all levels have shown little interest in promoting universal design principles, save for a casual mention of the term in policy documents. This is in spite of changes to disability and ageing policies promoting more autonomy and independence for individuals. When political leadership is absent, leadership often defaults to the community, or to be precise, to a handful of people with a passion for the cause. In 2013 a chance meeting of two unrelated individuals set the wheels in motion to establish a centre for universal design in Australia. This paper charts the development and progress of the organisation through volunteer effort, harnessing community support, maintaining international connections, using social media, and establishing a resource-rich website and newsletter

**Keywords.** Citizen action, universal design, human rights

## 1. Background to Universal Design in Australia

The concept of universal design arrived in Australia around the same time as elsewhere in the world and for many of the same reasons. Similarly to other countries, it began as a social movement for a barrier-free built environment for wheelchair users. The International Year of Disabled Persons in 1981 [1], and various legislative instruments stemming from the civil right movements of the 1960s in the United States, brought more attention to the need to design accessibility into the built environment [2]. The barrier-free social movement has evolved more recently into a movement for inclusion for everyone regardless of their personal circumstances or background, and in all areas of life, not just the built environment. Australia shares many of the same misconceptions about universal design, the same myths, and the same issues with terminology [3] Explaining universal design is difficult when design paradigms have been, and are, about segregation rather than inclusion. The underlying principles of universal design [4] cut across marketing theories of market segmentation, design theories of the “average

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person”, niche markets and specialised designs [5]. Universal design challenges the individuals who typically have the power and authority to design everything in our world to look beyond themselves, and to those who are not “like me”. It asks the question, who have I left out? instead of, which group am I designing for? Once the concept of universal design is grasped and understood, its simplicity is revealed. Until the paradigm shift is made, it seems too difficult to implement. The lynch pin of understanding is that paradigm shift, and that is the quest of any person or organisation promoting the concept of universal design – actively finding ways to help people make that shift within the context of competing interests in a market based economy.

## **2. Citizen Action and Human Rights**

Citizen activism is considered to be any individual action with social consequences often using collective activity [6]. One of the drivers for collective activism is the change in new norms regarding rights and justice. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) is one such example. International collective activism brought the Convention into being and with it new norms for people with disability. However, the fight for rights continues in market based neo-liberal economies due to the conflicting interests of multiple stakeholders. This leads to contested negotiations for the realisation of human rights. Ethics philosopher Lawrence C. Becker poses a mutual advantage theory to explain this [7].

Becker’s mutual advantage theory gives some context to the barriers to realising rights, but also the means by which to do this in our designed world. While the UNCRPD and associated Protocols obliges all parties to realise the human rights and fundamental freedoms of people with disabilities, the let-out clause is the acknowledgment that conditions cannot be improved overnight and that it is an incremental process. This means there is no goal or deadline for when this is to happen. The short version of Becker’s theory is that we have to be pragmatic about rights in a market-based economy where everything is negotiable. Basically, each party is expected to bring to the negotiating table something of benefit for the other party. For example, in the case of the house building industry it can bring greater equity and inclusion for all citizens through introducing universal design principles in mainstream housing. But what do people with disabilities and older people, bring to the table that other customers do not? Bringing a generalised good for society, including lower health costs and reduced dependency on others, is considered insufficient return for making changes to standard designs [8][9].

The mutual advantage model is not about punishing people who do harms or wrongs. The aim is to correct the situation by developing productive reciprocal relationships with the offender, namely helping them to design in ways that include rather than exclude. Educative and other arguments are used as part of the corrective process. Providing a corrective good for bad received is compatible with the UNCRPD’s view – correcting past wrongs without punishing the offender. As education is largely a voluntary action and cannot be relied upon for wholesale social change where vested interests are concerned, education alone is unlikely to result in the desired response. When Becker wrote this article in 2005, electronic social media was in its infancy. More recently, social movements have capitalised on this mode of communication to help effect change by providing a channel for informal education in a drip-feed fashion in bite-sized pieces. It is also a way of mobilising targeted sections of the population. Becker’s observations as

to why we still fight for rights helps provide context, but also points us to ways to use negotiated processes to achieve social goods – community based social action.

### **3. How it All Began**

This is essentially a story of passion and commitment by a few determined individuals who believe in the value of what they are seeking to achieve. Evolving from an idea into an established entity has taken goodwill, volunteer effort, pro bono support, and a sprinkling of good luck.

Similarly to other causes, foundations, and not for profit enterprises, it takes a leader, a handful of true believers with passion, time and commitment to begin the hard road to establishment. Serendipitous events and goodwill are the main currencies when finances start at zero. In this respect Centre for Universal Design Australia is no different. It was the convergence of two unrelated events that brought the organisation into being and where it begins as a personal story before evolving into a team effort.

In 2013 a professional conference organiser was given my name as someone interested in universal design. He had heard about universal design in conversations related to previously staged conferences related to health, disability and ageing. When asked if I would help him run a conference on universal design, I agreed at once. The inaugural Australian Universal Design Conference was held in August 2014. The keynote speaker was the Chief Officer of Ireland’s Centre for Excellence in Universal Design who spoke of their achievements since its inception in 2007. At the close of the conference a call was made for a similar centre for universal design to be set up in Australia [10]. How this might be achieved was not discussed and it rested as a good idea until early 2015.

The success of the first conference led to thoughts of a second. This encouraged me to do something about the idea of a centre so that I would have something to announce at this next major event. Without any funding, a virtual approach was the only option available and I set about creating a website using free software and minimal costs for hosting. Each week I collected items to post that varied from academic research to magazine articles on topics that covered built environment, housing, transportation, industrial design, tourism, parks and recreation, ICT, and universal design in learning. The website software included an option to create a newsletter of latest posts that could be sent to subscribers. I activated this facility and put the option to subscribe on the website menu. Without advertising or special promotional efforts we gradually built a list of more than 350 subscribers to the weekly newsletter.

### **4. Becoming a Legal Entity**

A chance meeting with a chartered accountant in early 2016 resulted in a pro bono offer to set up an organisation as a not-for-profit company. As the UNCRPD cites universal design as a means by which to achieve inclusion [11], and the term is understood internationally, the three founding directors decided that “Centre for Universal Design Australia” was a functional and descriptive name with a suitable acronym – CUDA. Now registered as a legal entity, we were able to announce the establishment of CUDA at the second Australian conference in late 2016. At this point, without core funding, our equity remained in the passion and volunteer effort of a few.

CUDA's constitution required eight directors and consequently the founding directors made an open call for expressions of interest to fill the vacant positions. It was felt that an open call was necessary for transparency and inclusion. Selection was made based on a spread of knowledge, experience, skill and location across Australia. Eventually the board consisted five directors from New South Wales, two from Victoria, and one from Queensland. Face to face meetings require funds and time, both of which were in short supply. Consequently, board meetings were carried out each month by teleconference. While this is not necessarily the best method for communication and decision-making, the goodwill and passion of directors has made this work.

Once established as a legal entity, the administrative, governance and reporting tasks increased significantly, all the while continuing with advocacy activities and maintaining the website and weekly newsletter. Not-for-profit entities are usually able to access government funding opportunities, but charity status is required to access funds from trusts and foundations. Setting up as a not for profit organisation in Australia is not difficult, but attaining charitable status is another matter. In recent years successive governments have tightened the regulations around charities to minimise bogus operations. However, we eventually achieved registered charity status in mid 2017 [12].

The original vision of living in a world where everyone can participate in all aspects of social and economic life remains our overarching philosophy and vision. Our mission, of course, is to do our best to bring the vision into being. Our original objectives were adjusted to better reflect our charitable status and to specifically include the promotion and protection of the human rights of people with disability, older people and children. We aim to do this by operationalising the concept of inclusion across design disciplines and policy development through resource provision, education and training, and forming a community of practice.

## **5. Achievements**

The first major achievement after becoming a legal entity was staging the second Australian Universal Design Conference in 2016. Both conferences were well received with delegates attending from all parts of Australia, New Zealand and a handful of people from other parts of the world. At the time of writing, the third conference is in the last stages of planning and will be held in September 2018 in Brisbane, Queensland. While the first two conferences attracted delegates with an interest in universal design, it is hoped that the third conference will reach a wider audience who may not be as conversant with the concepts. To this end the focus will be on housing and tourism with the theme, "Home and Away, Creating inclusion everywhere". The conferences have been made possible with significant continued pro bono support from the professional conference organiser who staged the first event in 2014. Conferences are not only a vehicle for knowledge sharing, but also a platform for promoting CUDA and establishing the brand. These conferences are also an opportunity to educate conference and event staff on universal design and inclusive practice, such as introducing them to live captioning and an accessible podium.

The next major step was developing our first e-learning course, Introduction to Universal Design [13]. Once again, using open source software, a CUDA director with e-learning experience designed the course. Consistent with our aims and objectives of educating and informing people about universal design, we decided to make this open source and free to everyone. It covers the 7 classic principles of universal design

attributed to Mace [14], Steinfeld and Maisel's 8 goals of universal design [15], and understanding diversity and stereotyping. The sign-up rate has been pleasing and by mid-2018 we had more than 140 students with a completion rate of 45%.

## **6. Members**

Not for profit organisations in Australia have the opportunity to invite people to be members. As a grass roots organisation CUDA directors agreed to set the membership fee at a rate that could be afforded by most people (A\$25.00 for 2017) and not a rate where members would expect benefits other than showing support for the organisation. This is also consistent with being a charity. Providing member benefits, no matter how small, takes additional resources. Nevertheless, membership benefits and categories can be established in the future if and when the organisation is in a position to do so.

## **7. Networking and Social Media**

Part of the strategy for establishing CUDA as a promoter of universal design and inclusive practice is plying personal and professional networks gained over many years. This has resulted in invitations for CUDA to participate in high level policy discussions, roundtables and workshops where the voice of universal design and inclusion can be heard. It has also resulted in requests to present workshops and seminars, and to write articles for magazines.

Another strategy is the use of social media, namely Linked In, Facebook and to a lesser degree, Twitter. The posts are taken from the latest newsletter and published individually over the coming week. This "drip-feed" method allows people to view items as and when they have time rather than the full newsletter. It is also a convenient way to view items on a smart phone rather than a computer. Linked In has proven to be the most successful platform for gaining readership and directing traffic to the CUDA website.

The use of social media, particularly Linked In, has allowed CUDA to gain more international connections. Social media has also help maintain national and international networks and also provides a feed of information for new posts for the website and newsletter.

## **8. Website**

To date, the website remains the core of the organisation [16]. The information posted and stored has created an information rich repository on the application of universal design and inclusive practice. The format is essentially a searchable blog site which is easily managed without needing special training. While many blog sites encourage feedback and comments, the CUDA site acts only as an information clearing house. Articles and news items range from academic research to topical news stories. They are posted under various categories and sub categories such as built environment, housing, open space, tourism, products, policy, human rights, services, employment, learning, and ICT. Due to the number of different categories and sub categories that universal design covers, and the six to eight posts per week, the number of posts soon passed 500 and in

2018 we are attempting to keep the number to around 750 by removing older or out of date posts.

The website software collates the new posts and is set up to automatically send these posts in an email newsletter to subscribers each week. Without actively promoting the newsletter the number of subscribers has passed 350, some of whom live outside Australia. After running a survey of subscribers in May 2018, we know that the newsletter is highly regarded. Although not all posts are on topics of interest to all subscribers, the variety of topics is appreciated and continues to remind subscribers that universal design can be applied across disciplines.

Over the last 12 months the number of monthly website views averaged 3,000, and the number of visitors between 1,200 and 1,500, mostly from Australia (60%). Visitors from other countries regularly include the United States, Ireland, Canada, UK, India, New Zealand, and more than 60 other countries across Asia, Europe, Middle East, Caribbean, South America and Africa, together accounting for 40% of all views. These figures indicate a world-wide interest in universal design and a desire to keep up to date with information and research globally.

## **9. The Future**

While we maintain a high level of goodwill from our members and “true believers” we will not fulfil our potential until we can have dedicated paid staff to execute our strategies. In the life of organisations that have grown from the ground up, we are still very young and establishing our credentials. We remain ever vigilant to funding opportunities regardless that we work in a political climate that is not conducive to supporting interest groups, advocacy organisations or peak bodies. Universal design of itself does not target a specific disadvantaged group even though its outcomes do. Rather, it targets those who have the power to change their design processes to be more inclusive.

Inclusion is an abstract concept. Design is a professional endeavour. Designing universally is a process. Finding the right partners, supporters and champions is a continuing and evolving quest. In the meantime we rely on a small income from membership fees, a few consulting opportunities and the occasional small donation to keep us financially viable and to pay the administrative fees required of a legal entity.

## **10. Summary**

CUDA has evolved from a discussion by two people over a cup of coffee to a legal entity with members and supporters, a social media following, newsletter subscribers, and a website with consistent regular traffic. Pro bono contributions to establish the organisation and to run two successful conferences have been critical to CUDA’s establishment. To date, its continuing success is entirely due to volunteer effort. The website and newsletter are highly regarded by members and subscribers, and CUDA is contributing to policy development and strategic decision making at state and national levels. As with most grass roots organisations it takes time to grow into a fully-fledged operation with staff and projects that further the aims of the organisation. Reaching out to the hearts and minds of those who have yet to grasp the concepts of universal design is something that CUDA directors, members and supporters will continue into the future.

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