



# Things to Think About!

## Universal Housing Dilemma

### Part 1

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Check out these websites for more information on housing:

#### Fair Housing Act

<http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/titl e8.htm>

[http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/ho using\\_coverage.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/housing/ho using_coverage.htm)

#### American's with Disabilities Act

<http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>

If there is anything that is not discussed in our newsletters and you would like to see it discussed, or you would like to be added to our newsletter mailing list, please contact us at [snrproject@hotmail.com](mailto:snrproject@hotmail.com)

One of the big questions we hear quite frequently is, “Where can I find the law about how to build an accessible house?” The answer is, unfortunately, there isn’t one.

Currently there is no legislation regulating accessible or universal housing design for single family dwellings. Unfortunately the Fair Housing Act (FHA) only addresses multiple housing units and does nothing to promote the same standards for single family homes. This means the Fair Housing Act only addresses housing provided in apartment complexes, designated group homes and other “public” types of housing. This is not to be confused with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which was originally designed for public and commercial spaces. Again, nothing is said about single family dwellings. This leaves a lot of room for interpretation.

Given there is no specific standard for single family home construction most architects, drafters, and builders will reference both the FHA and the ADA for basic standards but these cannot be enforced by municipalities as single family dwellings were not included in either act in their present form. This makes finding a home a big problem for families with disabled family members or who would like to age in place without large remodels later on. As of this writing there are no proposed amendments or legislation addressing single family dwellings in sight.

While inroads have been made by the construction industry regarding accessible/universal home design there is still a long way to go before the general public is able to find truly accessible housing without a great deal of difficulty. Current thought among most builders seems to be if a home has a bathroom and kitchen that meets commercial ADA standards, has an exterior ramp and a wide front door; the home must be wheelchair accessible. While this is a step in the right direction builders and designers seem to have forgotten that people with disabilities don’t spend all their time in the bathroom or the kitchen. They want to be able to access the rest of the house as well.

Families find themselves “making do” with homes that do not meet the needs of every family member and, therefore, don’t meet the needs of the family as a whole. The majority of older homes feature narrow doorways, small rooms, low ceilings and narrow hallways. Newer tract homes have the same problem compounded by multiple flights of stairs to elevated entrances which makes getting to the front door impossible for anyone using a wheelchair, crutches or even a cane. If the individual is lucky they might find a home where the living room will be found on the same level as the front door. If not, be ready to climb more stairs. The rest of the rooms in the home are either up, or down, another steep flight of stairs. The disabled individual is still limited to a very small space within the overall space of the home, unable to participate in activities with other family members in other parts of the house. Our living spaces are still some of the most difficult spaces to navigate.

In our family quest to find adequate housing we’ve identified three specific problems.

**1. New Equipment Technology**

Mobility aid designs (wheelchairs, walkers, ceiling lifts, etc.) have changed dramatically over the last 20 years, and will continue to do so at a rapid pace. The space needed to maneuver the newer equipment varies from individual to individual as most technology is now “custom made” for the individual user. The standard ADA 5 foot turning radius set in 1990 when the Act was passed and used by most contractors as the basis to start from, is no longer adequate for many individuals and some types of mobility aids. For many adults newer equipment means a pivot turn requiring 6 to 8 feet, instead of the ADA mandated 5 feet. Counter heights may need to be set higher, or lower, depending on the individual and the equipment being used. Children will have other requirements which will change as they grow. Newer equipment just doesn’t fit in smaller spaces.

**2. Finding a House Plan with Adequate Space**

Many builders insist on using “plug and play” home designs. Using a stock house plan they will allow the purchaser to choose the floor plan and then “Substitute ADA accessible bathroom B for non-ADA accessible bathroom A, add another foot in the kitchen, toss in a ramp and you’re good to go”. What about the rest of the

house? Many families find themselves having to resort to custom designed homes, or remodeling a limited space in an existing home. Either way the home owner is left with a space difficult to live in.

**3. Finding an Architect or Drafter Well Educated in Universal Design Concepts**

Most builders we’ve run across (and we’ve interviewed quite a few) don’t understand that the ADA is merely a standard to use, not the general rule, and does NOT apply to single family homes. Many families need adaptations and accommodations that actually exceed the ADA standard. A savvy architect or builder will understand the need to work closely with individuals and families to ensure they are creating properly sized spaces that will meet specific needs.

Many individuals in the housing industry are intimidated by the term and shy away from building homes using universal design. Building a home using universal design concepts is not rocket science. It can be done using commonly available building products, plain old common sense and a bit of direction.

The key is in understanding current legislation and personal education. Current Fair Housing Act and Americans with Disabilities Act regulations contain useful information for architects, contractors, builders and consumers to use as a basis for basic accessible home design. By researching current regulations and other resources consumers will be better able to assist building professionals develop creative, enjoyable spaces for the entire family, regardless of ability.

- Stay tuned for Universal Housing~Part 2 “Figuring it Out”

