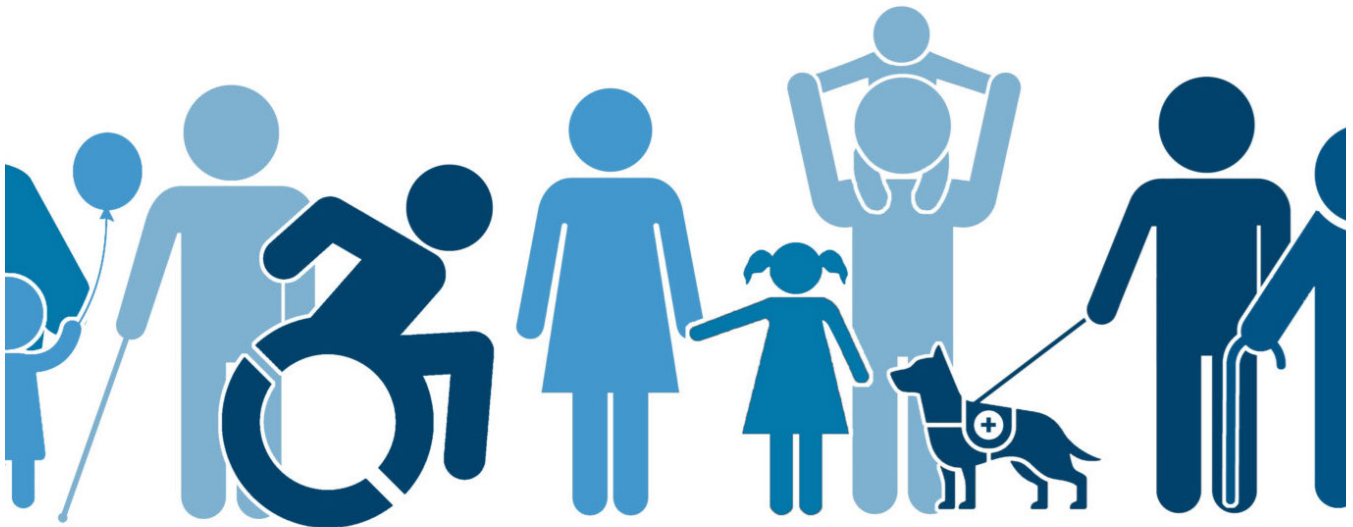


universal design

GOING BEYOND CODE TO ACCOMMODATE EVERYONE

by Chad Edwards



Universal Design has been building momentum since 1963, when architect Selwyn Goldsmith published “Designing for the Disabled”, and since the early 1970s, when architect Ron Mace coined the term. Their impact is evident across the U.S. and around the world—in both the built environment and the codes that shape it. Still, as they emphasized, the goal is bigger than compliance. We need to move beyond code minimums and commit to true universal design in all our work. As I (and others) like to say, “Designing to code gives you the worst building you can have without breaking the law.”

“Us vs. Them” thinking does not get us very far. Universal Design starts from a different premise: there is no “them” – only “us”. The scope of Universal Design is broad, and the benefits are widely shared. Sensitively designed environments support people across a wide range of needs and life circumstances: from wounded veterans to parents with strollers, from people living with Parkinson’s disease or Down’s Syndrome to those who are blind or hearing impaired, or athletes recovering from injuries to older adults with walkers – in short, all of us.

Design can accommodate how people move throughout a building. Doors, for example, are a simple and effective entry point into Universal Design. Most people are familiar with automatic push-button door controls at the main entrance of public buildings; that same courtesy should extend to restroom entrances as well. Restroom approaches are often tight and include multiple turns to protect privacy, which can make the door difficult to navigate. Mechanized doors benefit people with permanent physical disabilities, those on crutches, and parents with strollers. In other areas, wider doorways can expand access – for instance, allowing two people to walk side-by-side while communicating in sign language or to assist those with a sales cart or luggage.

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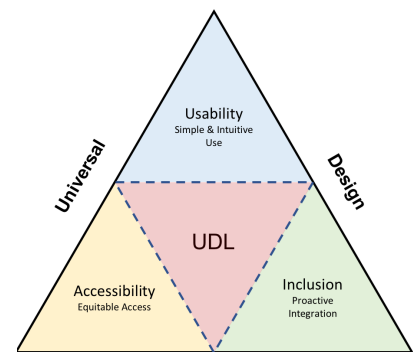
A feature of healthy architecture is to make the main stairway prominent and appealing - placing them front and center entices people to use them. These stairways are often wider and offer natural light or nice views. In this way, there is increased physical activity for occupants and, in some cases, reduced energy use. This has really good implications, but this approach should not come at the expense of those who need to use the elevator. The elevator shouldn't be tucked away or feel secondary. All vertical means of circulation should have a similar quality and experience.

Design can be also used to enrich the user experience. Good design engages as many senses as possible - not just sight. Texture, temperature, air movement, scent, acoustics, and sound can help people navigate a space and make it more enjoyable. These cues can also signal hazards or create meaningful transitions from one area to the next. They shape the implied tone and help people understand spatial relationships: Is this a large, formal room or a quiet intimate space?

Design can also provide places of refuge where smaller areas can create a pause before entering a larger space. This can be especially supportive for a veteran with PTSD or someone with certain Development Disabilities. Being sensitive to stark contrasts while allowing for some distinction could aid someone with Autism and those with visual difficulties.

how can you help?

As a stakeholder (a building owner, a tenant, or you work or live in a building), get engaged; begin the conversation to promote universal design solutions. Above all, Universal Design is not an add-on feature, but a crucial element to be integrated at the conceptual level. Chris Downey, yet another architect, restated the adage, "There are two types of people: those with disabilities and those that have not quite found theirs yet." If we effectively design for our differences, we can create a much richer, more beautiful, and more integrative world for all of us to enjoy.



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Chad, is president and CEO of emersion DESIGN, the world's first architecture and engineering firm to have a LEED Platinum office. He strives to lead with integrity, from a heart of service, and to be the best steward possible for his clients and staff.



