

QUICKNOTES

Universal Design

Universal Design (UD) can be defined as the process of creating buildings, products, and environments that are usable by people of all ages and physical capabilities, making it possible for all to have access to and fully enjoy their homes, neighborhoods, work places, and other community destinations. Universal design is based on the recognition that all people, regardless of ability, should be valued equally. UD is highly relevant to planning officials, planning directors, and planners seeking to improve the quality of life in their communities by providing residents with better choices of where to work, live, and play.

The Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University offers seven principles of universal design:

- Equitable use
- Flexible use
- Intuitive use
- Perceptible information
- Tolerance for error
- Low physical effort
- Size and space for approach and use

The terms universal design and visitability, or accessible design, are often used interchangeably. Visitability focuses on addressing mobility limitations through building code standards, while universal design is an overarching concept targeting people of all ages and abilities, and may go far beyond these codes to ensure the built environment is usable by all.

WHY UNIVERSAL DESIGN IS IMPORTANT

Three recent trends have pushed universal design to the forefront of contemporary planning: the changing demographics of seniors and people with disabilities, the lifestyle preferences of the aging baby boomer generation, and a shift in Medicaid funding that has encouraged home and community-based care over institutions.

The number of older adults in communities across the U.S. continues to grow as the baby boomer generation ages. Unlike prior generations, baby boomers expect to stay in their own homes and communities, and they demand designs and features to support them as they age. The planning community must be aware of how this “silver tsunami” will transform how homes are built and how neighborhoods are designed, and local leaders must rethink priorities and embrace UD principles in order to meet the changing needs of their communities.

INTEGRATING UD WITH NEIGHBORHOOD AND COMMUNITY DESIGN

Universal design is becoming broader and more inclusive of neighborhood, community, and urban design. Three major issues arise within a broader look at UD. Car-centricity dominates communities, making the automobile the primary mode of transportation; neighborhoods lack safe pathways for people to walk or maneuver wheelchairs or strollers; and most homes are not accessible to and visitable by all people due to stairs, narrow doorways, and other barriers to those with impaired mobility. These issues can increase isolation among a community’s most vulnerable populations.

Planners have become increasingly aware of the problem of car-centric communities and poor design that disadvantages pedestrians. Current planning trends support the diversification of transportation forms, from bicycles and public transit to golf carts and personal electric vehicles. Many communities across the country are seeing the benefits of features such as multiple transportation choices, transit-oriented development, and accessible pedestrian wayfinding, as they provide mobility options for all users, including the very young, the very old, and people with disabilities.



American Planning Association

Making Great Communities Happen

The issue of inaccessibility in housing, a critical element in universal design, has not received the same amount of attention as car-centric communities and neighborhood pathways. Bringing universal design to housing has traditionally not been the planner's role. To provide a truly comprehensive approach to neighborhood, community, and urban design, and to ensure that all people have access to and can remain in their homes as they age or lose mobility, planners must promote UD concepts in housing and the built environment.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Detractors of universal design say implementing UD standards is too expensive, and some developers think consumers find UD features unsightly. However, the cost of adding UD features to new construction is minimal, especially if such features are built into the design from the beginning. And the best practices of universal design make universal elements—wider doorways, reinforced bathroom walls (should grab bars need to be added at a later date), no-step entrances, open floor plans—seamless and unnoticeable. These barrier-free features open the door, physically and figuratively, to all people; such homes have lasting value as structures that accommodate all stages and circumstances of life, including childhood, injury, illness, and aging.

Some states have passed universal design legislation requiring housing (sometimes specifically affordable housing) to be built to UD standards, but these requirements do not always find their way into local zoning codes. Promoting universal design requires education and outreach so that all concerned will fully appreciate its advantages and minimal burdens. Local aging plans may help to identify the needs of older adults, thereby strengthening the argument for universal design. Transferring that information to the development community and consumers can be challenging. Planners and planning officials can take leadership roles in making all these changes happen.

OPTIONS FOR PROMOTING UD

Several mechanisms exist for promoting universal design, including tying accessibility standards to affordable housing programs or federal aid. In 2007, the Arkansas Development Finance Authority (ADFA) adopted universal design standards for its HOME program and the Low Income Housing Tax Credit program; now, seven percent of ADFA-funded multifamily units must meet usability standards. Arkansas has also created a manual that codifies inclusive design, making the process understandable and streamlined for the development community.

Planners can also work to codify UD standards within their communities. The City of Sacramento adopted a Universal Design Ordinance in February 2010 to help provide more housing options in the city that suit the needs of older adults and people with disabilities. Builders of single-family residential developments over 20 units must provide UD features as options to buyers. The ordinance also calls for model homes to include UD features such as no-step entries, wider doorways, lever handles, rocker light switches, and general accessibility options for bedrooms, kitchens, and bathrooms, so people may see how they work prior to buying.

Several cities provide financial incentives to developers to include UD and visitability elements within their projects. The City of Pittsburgh provides tax credits for builders who incorporate six types of universal design features into new or renovated housing, and the City of San Diego's 2010 Voluntary Accessibility Program provides certain development incentives in exchange for incorporating UD features in new dwelling units.

In addition to promoting UD legislation at the state and local levels, planners and planning officials may consider creating funding sources like the Home Accessibility Modification Program of King County, Washington, or the City of Alexandria, Virginia's Rental Access Modification Program, which offer grants to help low-income tenants make accessibility modifications to their units.

The need for homes, buildings, and neighborhoods accessible to all is growing. As our population continues to age and as more and more people with disabilities and older adults seek to remain in their homes, universal design will be an important planning tool to create communities of lasting value and choice for all residents, regardless of age or ability.

PAS QuickNotes is a publication of the American Planning Association's Planning Advisory Service (PAS). Copyright © 2010. Visit PAS online at www.planning.org/pas to find out how PAS can work for you. American Planning Association staff: W. Paul Farmer, FAICP, Chief Executive Officer; William R. Klein, AICP, Director of Research and Advisory Services; Tre Jerdon, QuickNotes Editor; Tim Mennel, Senior Editor; Julie Von Bergen, Assistant Editor; Susan Deegan, Senior Graphic Designer.

REFERENCES

1. Published by American Planning Association

Evans-Cowley, Jennifer, AICP. 2006. "Zoning for Universal Design and Visitability." *Zoning Practice*, April.

Merriam, Dwight, FAICP. 2008. "The Americans with Disabilities Act: Six Key Points for Planning Officials." *The Commissioner*, Spring, p.3.

"Resource Finder: Universal Design and the ADA," *The Commissioner*, Spring 2008, p. 10.

2. Other Resources

The Center for Universal Design. *Universal Design in Housing*. 2006. North Carolina State University. Available at www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/index.htm.

Vanderheiden, Greg. 1996. "Universal Design . . . What it is and What it isn't." University of Wisconsin-Madison, Trace R & D Center. Available at http://trace.wisc.edu/docs/whats_ud/whats_ud.htm.