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CREATING INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENTS FOR ALL

*Accessible design should be a given

Author: Whitney Gould

If more architects were disabled, it's a good bet that our buildings and bridges would be more accessible. But in most cases, you probably wouldn't even notice. Accommodations for people of all degrees of physical ability and infirmity would be seamlessly incorporated from the get-go.

This is the essence of universal design. And, as the population ages, it shouldn't take an impairment for every architect to see the humanity and common sense in designing for the widest range of users.

The architect Michael Graves, lately known for his jazzy housewares designs for Target, has become an involuntary poster boy for the cause. Paralyzed from the waist down by a recent infection of his spinal cord, Graves has come to share the headaches familiar to many people with disabilities: sinks too low for the arms of a wheelchair; too-narrow doors; drawers and window blinds out of reach.

According to the New York Times, the architect is designing a new work space, accessible by ramp and elevator, and retrofitting his home in Princeton, N.J. "Universal design, once just a matter of complying with an abstract code, has become a personal reality," the Times reported.

"That is going to change a lot of things," Maurizio Antoninetti, a universal design activist, told me. Antoninetti, a teaching associate at San Diego State University in California, uses a wheelchair as the result of a spinal cord injury. "He is a very powerful force" in design circles, he said of Graves. "What he is experiencing right now is what a large proportion of the population experiences every day."

Then there's that bridge under way in Venice. It's designed by Santiago Calatrava, architect of the Milwaukee Art Museum's winged expansion on the lakefront.

Amazingly, the Venetian bridge was conceived with several steps at its approaches, but no ramps. The resulting outcry from the disabled community forced Calatrava to modify the design. He is adding an elevator that will run along the outside of the gently arched span over the Grand Canal. Maybe it's not the best solution aesthetically; also, elevators can break down. But at least the bridge will be usable by people in wheelchairs, parents with strollers and tourists dragging suitcases in a city where cars are outlawed.

I wanted to talk with Calatrava directly about this. OK, what I really wanted to ask him was: What could you have been thinking? But a spokeswoman in his Zurich office said the architect was not available for comment.

Elaine Ostroff, however, was. "This is so disappointing," said Ostroff, a universal design activist and founding director of the Adaptive Environments Center in Boston. "Calatrava is such a great engineer and architect. If anyone could figure out how to do it right, he could."

So you'd think. I recalled one of my many exchanges with the gracious and engaging Calatrava. This one was in early 2001, when the art museum expansion was in the home stretch. He arrived late for the breakfast interview, his left arm in a sling as the result of a skiing mishap. Profusely apologetic for keeping me waiting, he explained that he was having trouble buttoning his shirt. "Everything takes twice as long," he said.

Thinking back on this encounter in light of the Venice bridge flap, I wondered: What if he had broken a leg rather than an arm? What if he were forced to use a wheelchair? Would that have inspired a more accessible design?

Venice isn't the first Calatrava bridge to require a retrofit. His cabled footbridge linking our art museum addition to O'Donnell Park got some unwanted publicity last year when two older patrons tripped on a center curb alongside the cables and broke their hips. The resulting insurance claims forced the museum to install a temporary wooden barrier. Kahler Slater, the local architectural firm that worked with Calatrava on the museum expansion, has been exploring a permanent fix, either a stainless steel railing or cabled rails, that should be in place by fall.

"We're trying to keep it as simple as possible," so as not to clutter up Calatrava's design, Kahler Slater's Lou Stippich told me. Stippich and his colleagues faced a similar balancing act in correcting other glitches, such as a marble curb in the gallerias that people were also tripping on.

How to head off such problems? "You need to get these issues to the table early, so that you're not doing retrofits after the fact," Stippich says. The museum team did make a stab at prevention, but it obviously wasn't enough.

Hint to local architects and clients: There's a great resource right under your nose in IndependenceFirst, a well-versed, non-profit advocacy group for people with disabilities. Call (414) 291-7520 or check out the Web site, www.independencefirst.org.

Ostroff says education about accessibility should start much earlier, though. Universal design should be part of every architecture school curriculum, she says, and it should be considered when schools seek accreditation.

"It's attitudinal. Now, schools see (accessibility) as a code issue," she notes. "They need to see it as part of the design process, so that the emphasis is not just on how something looks but also on how it works. Accessibility needs to be integrated into a holistic approach to architecture that is people-oriented."

Amen. Universal design wasn't even a gleam in the eye of Venetian city-builders in the 15th and 16th centuries, or Milwaukee's founders in the 19th.

But in the 21st century, there is no excuse for making inclusiveness an afterthought. It should be a given.

Contacting Whitney Gould
Call Whitney Gould at 224-2358 or e-mail:
wgould@journalsentinel.com

Original URL: http://www.jsonline.com/news/metro/jun03/150131.asp
From the June 23, 2003 editions of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel