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Spaces

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CHECKING IN

EQUITABLE *SPACES*

BY DIANA MOSHER

*When accessibility
is done right,
the design elements
don't look different—*

*they just act
differently.*

APPLE INC. HAS BEEN CRITICIZED in recent years for releasing too many iPhones and encouraging conspicuous consumption. However, the company is deserving of kudos for the work it has done behind the scenes to incorporate accessibility into its products. Apple's VoiceOver technology guides blind and low-vision users through video editing, building a presentation, or navigating apps, and even supports refreshable braille displays. And, the Apple Watch now features fitness algorithms for wheelchair users designed to track their "pushes." These are just two examples of the latest features now available under Apple's new accessibility initiative.

Similarly, the interior design profession has the power to profoundly impact lives by creating residential and commercial spaces that are accessible to all. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was signed into law in 1990, but the need for accessible interiors actually became apparent decades earlier when wounded World War II veterans returned to homes they could no longer maneuver.

"Today the recognizable term is universal design, which means that everyone—from the smallest child to the frailest adult—can use it," says Shelley Siegel, FASID, founder of Universal Design & Education Network, LLC, a universal design-focused interior design firm. She also is a consulting designer with Siegel Design Group, Inc., a design-build company she owns with her husband, Roy Siegel.

"Let's just go beyond what's mandated and do it right. I've been advocating this for my clients my whole career," adds Siegel, who sits on the board of the Global Universal Design Commission, an organization championing voluntary universal design standards in commercial buildings. Wider doorways can be maneuvered by a wheelchair, but also by a mother with a stroller. "It's equitable use," Siegel says, providing an equitable example from her own life. In the 1950s, when Siegel was a young child, the handle on her family's aqua Frigidaire refrigerator was giant. "I could use it because it came down low, and my father could use it, too. That's really what universal design is about."



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Often times, simple adaptations result in a space that is truly accessible.

CODES AND BEYOND

Leslie Markman-Stern, ASID, principal of Leslie M Stern Design LTD, says, “We all have our own quirks and, as we grow older, it can become more difficult. Accessible design is for everyone and that’s who I design for both commercially and residentially.”

In addition to making sure all ADA requirements have been met, Markman-Stern also checks national and state building codes. “If I’m designing a commercial space, I check with the village, city, and state in addition to the federal code,” she explains. She also recommends doing additional research. “We’re seeing more autism now. This may not necessarily be in the codes. If you really want to go in depth, you need to look into it yourself.”

Markman-Stern delves deeply into accessibility at the onset of every project—not just whether anyone in a household is disabled, but also if elderly parents will be coming to stay and many other considerations the client probably hasn’t thought about. “It’s not to be invasive but, as I’m designing a space, I want to think of all different scenarios,” she states.

Accessible design shouldn’t have to look unattractive, notes Siegel. “When we use a Nanotex fabric, if there’s an incontinence problem, it can be a beautiful chenille. The materials, furniture, and products we use shouldn’t look different—they should just act different.” Wireless remote-controlled window shades and extension glides for cabinetry aren’t mandated, but they make good sense for everyone. And, calling grab bars “balance” bars can help designers break down emotional resistance and market subtle changes that a 55-plus client will be thankful for later on.

BETTER FOR BUSINESS, TOO

In addition to reducing the risk of lawsuits, businesses that welcome a wider range of people can significantly increase their bottom line by bringing in more customers. Accessible buildings provide easy access via ramps and automatic doors; their elevator cabs are outfitted with braille; and color palettes throughout the facility provide cues so those with low vision can differentiate a riser from a tread or



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Leslie M Stern Design LTD



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SHELLEY SIEGEL,
Universal Design &
Education Network/
Siegel Design



A holistic approach to creating safety-conscious and beautiful environments means all individuals—at any age, with or without physical constraints—can live well independently.

anticipate the proximity of a wall.

Surprisingly, even healthcare facilities sometimes fall short. The United States Access Board, an independent federal agency that promotes equality for people with disabilities, recently published rules on internet technology and communication, as well as on medical diagnostic equipment. According to Siegel, who was appointed to the Board by President Obama, mammograms and cat scans can be difficult to maneuver and wheelchair users should have the option of an independent transfer.

In Canada, the Ontario government has been leading the way since 2005 with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) and a stated goal of an accessible province by 2025. What will this look like? According to The Hon. David C. Onley, special advisor on accessibility to the minister responsible for accessibility, The Hon. Tracy MacCharles, business will harness the buying power of more people both in-store and online. More people with disabilities will participate in the workforce and economy. Entrepreneurs will be able to create new businesses based on inclusive design, products, and services. And, employers will have better access to untapped talent.

“Because of my long career in television journalism, I have been at the forefront of shifting perceptions around people with disabilities for several decades now,” says Onley. “As the first lieutenant governor [of Ontario] with a physical disability, I adopted accessibility as the theme for my term in office (2007-2014). I believe that accessibility is not just ramps and

automatic doors, it is an attitude of being welcoming and supporting people at all levels of ability.”

The AODA has accessibility standards in five key areas of daily life, including the Employment Standard and the Design of Public Spaces Standard, which helps make new and/or redeveloped sidewalks, roads, parks, and trails accessible. The Customer Service Standard aids in removing barriers to goods, services, or facilities; the Information and Communications Standard helps private- and public-sector organizations in making their information accessible to people with disabilities; and the Transportation Standard ensures travel is easier for everyone throughout the province.

“When I started 40 years ago, accessibility was for wheelchair users and that’s really all we were looking at,” says Siegel. “But today, with baby boomers and several generations in the workplace, accessible design allows you to keep workers on longer and to hire people you may not have hired years ago because you couldn’t accommodate them.”

Siegel suggests choosing a company that specializes in ergonomic chairs with adaptable seats and movable desks. They are more likely to be sensitive to people short—or tall—in stature and go beyond a cookie-cutter approach. Articulating keyboards assist employees with vision loss or low vision. Better lighting benefits this demographic as well, while also cutting down on workplace accidents for all.

Somebody with hearing loss might need a quieter workspace or amplification devices. “Not enough is being done with acoustics,” adds Siegel. Agile floor plans that acknowledge some people do better working alone, while others need to be in groups, is another way to make workplaces more accessible. “People with autism or other sensory issues ‘on the spectrum’ are wired differently and are more sensitive to color and lighting,” says Siegel. “There’s not one solution and not a way you can accommodate everyone 100 percent, but if you think about all these diversities, it’s going to make a big difference.” ①

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THE HON. DAVID C. ONLEY,
Government of Ontario

PUTTING ACCESSIBILITY ON THE MAP

AccessNow is an interactive tool that uses crowdsourcing to share accessibility information about restaurants, hotels, and other businesses around the world. Founded by Maayan Ziv, an activist, photographer, and entrepreneur based in Toronto, AccessNow already has 2,100 places pinned in 101 cities and is on its way to mapping the world.

Ziv has muscular dystrophy and has used a wheelchair her whole life. The question she asks every day—whenever she goes anywhere: Is it accessible? Interestingly, you can search to see if a place has amazing views, you can find out how much the beer is going to be that night, but you can’t find out if it’s accessible.

This was frustrating, so Ziv, a recipient of the David C. Onley Award for Leadership in Accessibility, decided to do something about it. And, while coming up with a solution to a problem in her own life, her initiative is benefitting and engaging others as well and encouraging them to get involved by requesting businesses remove their barriers.

“A green pin on the map represents a fully accessible location. These places might not have automatic doors, but we can get in, party, and go home with no problem,” according to Ziv.

A yellow pin means the location is only partially accessible; there might be alternative entrances or steps to the bar area. An orange pin is for patio access only. A red pin on the map means a location is not accessible at all. That’s when users tweet **#AccessNow** to spread the word and encourage positive change and a world that is accessible to all.

Get involved by downloading the AccessNow app from iTunes or Google Play.