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Designing for the Hearing Impaired

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The Americans with Disability Act has become a very important consideration when planning for an accessible space. Before a project commences the question needs to be asked; how is this space going to be used and by whom. Is the space for public or private use? And if it is for public use, it must be accessible for all types of people whether disabled or not as we can not discriminate.

One segment of our population has an invisible disability, one that can not be seen by the naked eye; the hearing impaired, or deaf and hard of hearing. Their needs are often overlooked because their disability is not seen. When we think of a disabled person we might imagine a person confined to a wheelchair or accompanied by a seeing eye dog.

Communication Barriers

The hearing impaired have very unique communication barriers that must be removed so that they can function effectively in their work, living and play spaces.

These include installing amplification devices in a public telephone or providing for a special type of telephone called a TDD where words are transmitted through Teletype. Flashing lights and vibration devices should be included in emergency equipment for both the home and office to warn the occupant of an impending emergency instead of relying solely on sound which cannot always be heard.

I was hired by a hearing impaired couple to design their home. Among their needs was a way to transmit the communica-

tion device of a doorbell. The doorbell must be made accessible to them. I hooked up an attractive lamp in their custom wall unit to the doorbell. The lamp blinked on and off when the bell was rung. It was placed in a strategic place so it could be viewed from many areas of their first floor. Thus, I was able to reestablish a major communication and emergency link to the world that many of us take for granted. At the same time, I was able to create an aesthetically pleasing device which was integrated into their living environment. □



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