

# Universal Housing

Queenslanders with Disability Network's  
position on Universal Housing

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**QUEENSLANDERS WITH  
DISABILITY NETWORK INC**

***NOTHING ABOUT US.....WITHOUT US***

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## Executive Summary

Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) outlines in this document their position on universal housing and their response to the to the consultation paper on Accessible Housing in Australia (2005) by Jaguar Consulting Pty Ltd in association with Alan Moran and Associates Pty Ltd

QDN believes the adoption of universal housing design in dwellings contributes to economic, social and environmental sustainability of our communities. That is:

1. Most people are able to live and visit a dwelling with dignity, regardless of their physical, psychological or sensory needs.
2. Universal housing design minimises the need for modifying, rebuilding or adding to a dwelling as the design meets most inhabitants' needs from the start.
3. If changes are required they can be done with minimal cost, materials, time and effort.

**Universal housing design should apply to all new and modified housing.** A legislative commitment to a minimum standard of universal housing design, and real incentives provided ensuring a consistency in the quality of housing from designers and builders is required. Buyers, renters and visitors can then rely on an adequate level of access, safety and adaptability being provided in all new and extensively modified housing to meet their needs.

While there are obvious advantages for people with disability through greater inclusion and participation in home and community life, the real winners will be governments. A reliable and adequate supply of accessible housing will lead to:

1. fewer injuries to older people and young children, the two groups who have most accidents in the home environment and whose rehabilitation is the most costly;
2. decreased demand for specialised housing for older people and people with a disability, because they can stay in their own home longer;
3. fewer admissions to acute care hospitals and rehabilitation facilities;
4. Safer work environments for people providing domestic and community based services; and
5. Less demand for home modifications, assistive equipment and paid assistance for daily living tasks.

To increase this supply of accessible housing, QDN calls for the immediate implementation of the following recommendations:

1. **The inclusion of access requirements in the Building Code of Australia for all new and extensively modified housing to universal design principles;**
2. **The adoption of requirements in building practice in Queensland through Queensland's *Building Act (1975)*;**
3. **The provision of incentives at local government level for housing designed above the minimum standard;**
4. **The provision of incentives for domestic refurbishments not requiring building approval, which comply with universal design principles; and**
5. **The provision of education and training on universal housing design as part of sustainable housing by the industry for the industry.**

## Introduction

Queenslanders with Disability Network (QDN) informs and supports individuals with disability to speak up across a range of issues that directly affect them in their communities, at a local, regional and global level.

QDN is a network of people with disability which:

1. undertakes its activities with a spirit and culture of interdependence, shared experiences, shared values, mutual respect, openness, conviviality, hospitality and fellowship;
2. is here for the long term; encourages participation, and harnesses the energy and potential for influence (experience and wisdom) of people with disability.

QDN is committed to ensuring that the Network will include all people with disability including:

1. People living in isolated, rural and remote and regional parts of Queensland.
2. People who experience profound disability.
3. The diverse range of disability experiences across the State.
4. People from indigenous and non-English speaking backgrounds.

QDN welcomes and enjoys the support of family members and allies of people with disability.

## **QDN's Core Beliefs**

QDN endorses:

- The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975).
- The Principles and Objectives of Queensland's *Disability Services Act (1992)*.
- the Principles of Queensland's *Guardian and Administration Act (2000)*.
- The Objects of the *Disability Discrimination Act (1992)* and the *Queensland Antidiscrimination Act (1991)*.

**QDN has the following six core beliefs**

### **1. Diversity**

All people with disability have a right to belong to and a contribution to make to the community. Dynamic and diverse societies come from the presence of empowered, free citizens who are valued, present, participating and welcomed, regardless of disability, race, colour, nationality, gender or marital status, religion or political beliefs, or sexual preference.

### **2. Inclusion**

People with disability should be welcomed in the community as ordinary citizens where they are genuinely given opportunities to contribute and actively participate, where not only their giftedness and talents are recognized but also their lived experiences are acknowledged.

### **3. Equity**

People with disability should be afforded the same value, opportunities and access to community life as other Queenslanders.

### **4. Acceptance**

Inclusion in community for people with disability should be unconditional and not vulnerable to withdrawal.

### **5. Reciprocity**

Societies are richer, wiser and gentler with the presence of people with disability. Exclusion diminishes people with disability and the whole community.

### **6. Responsibility**

The responsibility to ensure that people with disability have a place and are resourced to belong in community lies within all levels of government and the community at large.

# QDN's Position on Universal Housing Design

## 1. *Universal Housing Design as a contributing factor towards sustainable communities*

QDN believes the adoption of universal housing design in dwellings contributes to economic, social and environmental sustainability of our communities. That is:

1. Most people are able to live and visit a dwelling with dignity, regardless of their physical, psychological or sensory needs.
2. Universal housing design minimises the need for modifying, rebuilding or adding to a dwelling as the design meets most inhabitants' needs from the start.
3. If changes are required they can be done with minimal cost, materials, time and effort.

## 2. *Desired outcomes of Universal Housing Design*

QDN endorses the seven principles of universal design (Center for Universal Design 1997) and identifies the following outcomes when applied to the design of a dwelling:

1. **It meets the housing needs of people of every age and ability**, so they may participate in their community throughout their life;
2. **It allows for a diverse range of households to occupy a dwelling** cost-effectively and equitably over its lifetime;
3. **It provides for people to visit and stay in others' homes** for an extended period at short notice;
4. **provides a place in which it is safe both to live and to work**; and
5. **ensures usability and aesthetics are mutually compatible** and achieve broad market appeal.

QDN expects the following minimum performance measures for universal housing design:

1. There is a clearly discernable accessible path of travel from the recognised arrival point (e.g. car park, street frontage) and throughout the entry level of the dwelling.
2. The entry level has a living and food preparation area, bathroom, toilet and bedroom, all of which can be used by a person in a wheelchair.
3. All rooms, when furnished or fitted out, allow for adequate circulation space for a person using a wheelchair.
4. All doorways and corridors are wide enough to allow a person using a wheelchair to manoeuvre into and out of rooms.
5. Door furniture, switches, appliance controls and outlets are within reach of and can be comfortably used by all.
6. There is potential for future adaptation for vertical access by a person using a wheelchair to a dwelling with two or more levels.
7. Walls and ceilings are reinforced where assistive devices may be attached.
8. All entrances, rooms and pathways are readable by sight and touch.

### **3. Extent of universal housing design**

Universal housing design should apply to all new and extensively modified housing. That means:

1. There is legislative commitment to a minimum standard of universal housing design, and real incentives provided ensuring a consistency in the quality of housing from designers and builders. Buyers, renters and visitors can then rely on an adequate level of access, safety and adaptability being provided in all new and extensively modified housing to meet their needs.
2. The gradual increase of universally designed housing over time will be identified as a valuable community asset when labour costs continue to rise, supply of building materials are finite and people's needs continue to change.

### **4. Benefits to the user**

QDN considers that universal housing design is beneficial to all users because:

1. Inclusion and participation in home and community life will no longer be conditional on housing design;
2. The dwelling can be easily adapted as people's needs change;
3. The dwelling will be able to meet the needs of the various households living there throughout its lifetime.
4. Times of significant vulnerability (caused by injury, illness or disability) typically occur without warning, or time to plan for modifications.

### **5. Benefits to government**

Governments will be the greatest beneficiaries of universal housing design through savings to their health, housing and welfare budgets. It can be reliably anticipated there would be:

1. Fewer injuries to older people and young children, the two groups who have most accidents in the home environment and whose rehabilitation is the most costly;
2. Decreased demand for specialised housing for older people and people with a disability, because they can stay in their own home longer;
3. Fewer admissions to acute care hospitals and rehabilitation facilities;
4. Safer work environments for people providing domestic and community based services; and
5. Less demand for home modifications, assistive equipment and paid assistance for daily living tasks.

## **Issues for people with disability**

### **1. *Current housing design contributes to the isolation, segregation and exclusion of people with disability***

The lack of access requirements for housing design has contributed to the isolation, segregation and exclusion of people with disability in communities. People with disability depend on the availability of special or purpose-built housing to allow them to live in community settings.

This is anathema to inclusion and participation as equal members of society. Further, practical issues of moving, visiting friends, partnering, accessing transport, employment and services all become difficult, even prohibitive.

The outcome for people with disability is a gradual and relentless pressure towards isolation, segregation and exclusion from ordinary life. This is because restrictions on where people live automatically restrict their opportunities to participate.

### **2. *Current housing design contributes to inequity, discrimination and poverty of people with disability***

The housing assistance initiatives aiming to address inequity, discrimination and poverty for people with a disability are limited by the lack of accessible housing stock. Public housing programs have taken the lead in the past decade in providing accessible housing; however, these services have minimal building programs at present, due to the lack of capital funding.

Housing assistance programs do not address poor design of existing housing stock. Private initiatives for affordable housing are rarely offered incentives to provide accessible units of accommodation.

Financial assistance for home modifications in Queensland is inadequate with long waiting lists and the assistance only part covers the cost.

Even though there are legislative requirements for landlords to allow reasonable modifications to rental properties, the costs must be met by the lessee.

### **3. *Current housing design typically exacerbates people's disability, making them more vulnerable to illness and injury.***

There are a number of common housing features which make people more vulnerable than necessary. These include:

- Showers over baths
- Windows opening over baths
- Separate hot water taps without thermostatic valves
- Steps that wind or curve rather than a straight run with a landing
- Poorly designed or no hand rails
- Slippery tiles, particularly in wet areas.
- Narrow doorways and hallways
- 900mm wide toilet with in-swinging door
- Doorknobs and small switches

#### ***4. Current housing industry takes minimal responsibility for the housing needs of people with disability***

The private housing industry is primarily driven more by fashion and opportunity for immediate sale. There is minimal consideration of the long term effects the dwelling has on the many people who will live there over the building's life-time or of the changing needs of those people. The housing needs of people with disability, children, and frail old and injured people are not considered. Housing for people with disability is assumed to be provided 'elsewhere' by 'others'.

## Conclusion and Recommendation

There is some evidence that housing industry leaders are becoming aware of the commercial benefits of universal housing design. There is a desire that these proposed changes will be market driven and there will be no need for regulation.

Nevertheless, the primary beneficiaries for universal housing design are not those who make the design decisions. People with disability, with older people, children, domestic and community service workers and removalists continue to bear the brunt of thoughtless design decisions by those who are unlikely to be affected by them.

Governments will be the real winners in the widespread adoption of universal housing design. All levels of government must take the lead to ensure all new and extensively modified housing is designed to ensure all people are safe and able to participate to their full capacity.

### **This means:**

- 1. inclusion of access requirements in the Building Code of Australia for all new and extensively modified housing to universal design principles;**
- 2. adoption of requirements in building practice in Queensland through Queensland's *Building Act (1975)*;**
- 3. provision of incentives at local government level for housing designed above the minimum standard;**
- 4. provision of incentives for domestic refurbishments not requiring building approval, which comply with universal design principles; and**
- 5. provision of education and training on universal housing design as part of sustainable housing by the industry for the industry.**