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Aiding the visually impaired

Whether at home or out in public, visually impaired people have specific accessibility requirements that are different to those with physical disabilities. Thoughtful design and new technology can help.

AT HOME. visually impaired people can generally manage well without too many building modifications. However, public spaces are a different situation.

No mandatory requirements

To live as normally as sighted people, the visually impaired need to be able to easily move around public places like malls, cafés, hospitals, airports, railway stations, theatres and education facilities.

While public buildings must be designed to be accessible for people with physical disabilities, designing for blind and visually impaired people is not mandatory, and their needs are not generally well understood.

Designing residential buildings

In the home, there are some design features that improve accessibility for the blind or visually impaired.

Start with good lighting

Good lighting is essential. Light sources may be either natural or artificial, but regardless, there are some basic rules that should always be followed:

- Ensure there is good surface or task lighting for the activity being undertaken, particularly in the kitchen.
- Distribute lights evenly throughout an area to avoid contrast and variations in light levels.
- Locate light sources to avoid creating shadows.
- Avoid glare and reflection from shiny or glossy surfaces.

Where possible, use natural light for daytime lighting, particularly in kitchens.

Occupants of residential units in retirement villages often have impaired vision, yet a common

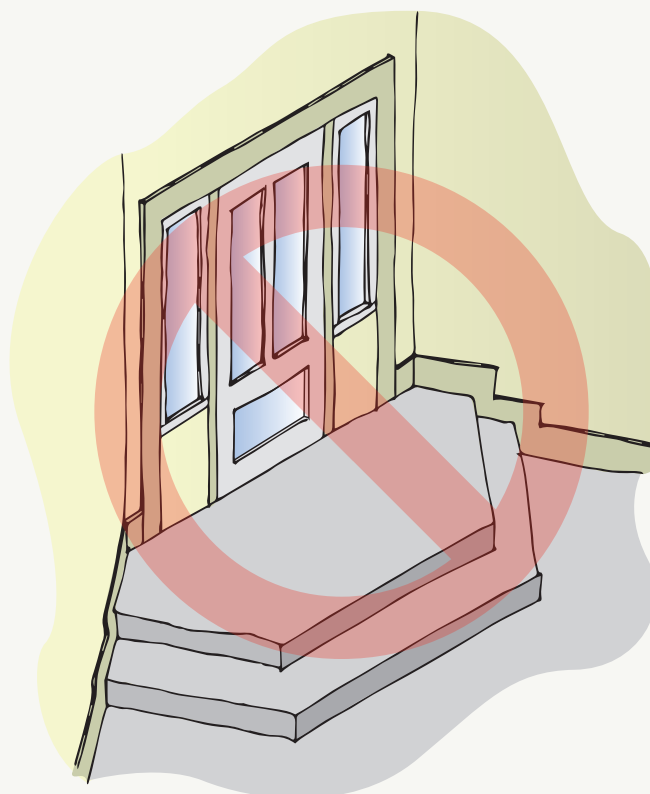


Figure 1 Avoid small changes of level and angles or curves at tread edges. If necessary, incorporate ramps or stairs with handrails and/or tactile markers.

layout in these units is to locate the kitchen centrally and away from windows and natural light in an open-plan living space. This then necessitates the need for artificial light, even during the daytime.

Include contrast and colour

To improve visibility:

- have colour-contrasted adjacent surfaces such as light walls and dark doors – even more important in public buildings where people are

less familiar with their surroundings

- avoid heavily patterned furniture and finishes as these can be visually cluttering
- install contrasting-coloured light switches and power points, for example, black switches and power points on a white or light-coloured wall
- select contrasting-coloured stair handrails, grab rails and stair nosings.