

# Opinion

## It's universal design's time

Geoff Penrose, General Manager of Lifemark Action, a division of CCS Disability Action, says the facts are undisputable. Universal design is simply better and now is the time to embrace it.

**UNIVERSAL DESIGN** is better for individuals, better for communities and better for society.

### ***The evidence is in the stats***

We are all different, one size does not fit all, and we need to incorporate this into our design thinking and planning.

Let's look at the facts. In our population, 3% have a vision impairment, 3% use a mobility aid, 6% are under 5, 11% will have a leg-related or eye-related accident this year, 14% are over 65 with 50% having a mobility impairment, 24% have a disability and 32% of all adults are obese.

All benefit from universal design features making a dwelling safer and easier to use. In comparison, the Building Code delivers dwellings easy to use for around 70% of the population at any one time.

Features of a Lifemark 3-star rating are easy for 95% of the population to use, a 4-star rating will assist 98% and a Lifemark 5-star rating caters for 99.9% of the population.

### ***Designers must change their approach***

Many architects and designers focus on the technical requirements of a dwelling and don't consider the diversity of the people who will live in and visit it. This needs to change.

Affordability is a key housing issue, as is lifetime value. The costs of universal design are minimal when considered at the concept stage of a project. Exclude them, and retrofit costs are significant - the power of 10 applies. For example, it can cost \$50 to redraw a doorway at the concept stage, \$500 to make this change when detailed plans are redrawn and \$5,000 to change it after it has been



built. Ensuring universal design is part of a project brief is therefore critical.

### ***Delivers safer homes***

Safety is also important, especially as occupants age. Every year, there are around 350,000 new claims to ACC relating to falls in a home costing taxpayers \$500 million.

A 2017 study by Otago University found the inclusion of minor safety features in a home can reduce falls by over 30% for people over 65. As we move to a society where one in four are over 65, housing stock must respond.

### ***Change is coming***

Countries like Norway are leading by introducing new universal design laws and regulations to stimulate change. Singapore recently started a state-funded housing retrofit programme. Ireland has a dedicated government-supported centre that has the sole focus of promoting universal design.

Locally, there are hopeful signs. Thames-Coromandel District Council changed its district plan in 2016 to incentivise residential plans to include universal design standards. This has resulted in over 10% of all new dwellings being built and independently verified to Lifemark 3-star rating.

Christchurch City Council introduced universal design for exemplar residential neighbourhood projects, and its new inner-city development has delivered over 50% of residential dwellings to a 3-star rating.

### ***Government needs to lead***

Universal design, however, must permeate all levels of government policy, and this requires central government leadership. Housing is a complex policy landscape. However, where public land, money or resources are used, the government must deliver dwellings that respond to the human condition.

The KiwiBuild housing programme and planned developments by Housing New Zealand over the next 10 years are unique opportunities to showcase design leadership. While early signs are encouraging, the devil is in the detail and what actually gets built.

### ***Private sector should embrace***

Finally, it is up to the private sector to embrace universal design. The retirement sector understands this, and most new villages use these principles because it makes the villages safer and easier to live in.

Effective communities are inclusive communities where all people can live well. We know that universal design works - we also know that now is the time to use it. ◀