## ABOUT YOUR HOUSE

**CE 63i** 

## Accessible Housing by Design—Living Spaces

#### UNIVERSAL DESIGN

People who inhabit and visit our houses come in all shapes and sizes, range in age from infants to seniors, and possess various ever-changing abilities and skills. As we grow up, grow old and welcome new people into our homes, our housing needs change. A house that is designed and built to reflect the principles of universal design is safer and more accommodating to everyone who lives or visits there, regardless of age or physical ability.

This About Your House fact sheet provides an overview of planning issues and design elements to consider when creating, renovating or redecorating living spaces. In this fact sheet, "living spaces" are the spaces in a house where people meet, sleep, relax, watch TV, read, play cards, listen to music, and so on. Task-specific spaces such as bathrooms and kitchens are

discussed in greater detail in separate *Accessible Housing by Design* fact sheets (see the last page for details).

## PLANNING YOUR LIVING SPACES

There are many aspects to consider when designing your living spaces. They include the needs and preferences of all family members and visitors, available space and room location.

### Welcoming visitors

Visitable housing is an emerging approach to house design that includes a basic level of accessibility, making homes easier for people with mobility impairments to visit. A visitable house incorporates three basic features:

- 1. A zero-step entry.
- 2. All main floor interior doors (including bathrooms) have a clear opening width of 810 mm (32 in.).

An overview of the key concepts of universal design is provided in "The Principles of Universal Design" text box on page 15.

**Bolded** terms throughout this fact sheet are defined in the "Glossary" text box on page 14.

3. At least a half-bathroom (toilet and sink), but preferably a full bathroom, on the main floor that is accessible to a person with a disability or limited mobility.

Incorporating these three features in your design is a great way to ensure that your home will better meet the needs of your family over time.





## Open planning

Open concept plans, with fewer doors, fewer hallways and rooms that flow into one another, are more accessible than plans with smaller, more enclosed rooms.

If you are designing a new home or planning significant renovations, think carefully about how the rooms will work. Is that wall between the kitchen and dining area really necessary? How about that door between the living room and dining room? Perhaps it could be made more spacious with a wide archway? Do you really need that hallway to get to the den and spare bedroom, or could they be accessed from an adjacent room (which would make the adjacent room larger because it would use the space saved by omitting the hallway)?

#### Location of rooms

If you are planning a new house, give some thought to how close rooms and spaces are to each other. For example, the kitchen should be adjacent to the dining area and the bedroom close to a bathroom. Consider separating potentially noisy spaces, such as a TV room, den or recreation room, from quiet spaces, such as sleeping areas.

Think also of the distances between the rooms. If you are going to spend most of your time in the family room or kitchen, a washroom close by will minimize the amount of walking you will have to do throughout the day, which could be of great benefit to someone with limited stamina.

Also consider the benefits of reorganizing room functions. For example, a seldom-used dining room could be converted to a bedroom or den. A rarely used living room might become an office. Take a look at how you are using your existing rooms and spaces, and consider how they might work better for you.

## General space planning

A continuous accessible path of travel at least 915 mm (36 in.) wide should be provided into and throughout all living spaces. Ideally, this path should provide access to all furniture, storage units, switches and controls (see Figure 1). If a room is very small, you may have to confine the path to its most important locations.

People who use a wheelchair or scooter need a clear floor space in front of furniture and switches of at least 760 x 1,220 mm (30 x 48 in.). This space should be integrated into the seating area. If possible, provide an open space within each living area to allow a wheelchair or

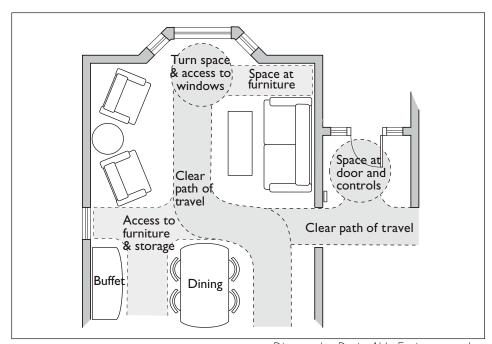


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure I Accessible path of travel

### Planning Tip

Open space under tables and work surfaces can often be used as part of the turning space for wheelchair or scooter users—but make sure that it's high enough to accommodate users' toes and knees.

scooter to turn around. A circular turning space of 1,525 mm (60 in.) diameter will accommodate most manual wheelchairs. Sometimes, though, it's easier to find space for a three-point turn. People who use walkers also need turning space, but not as much space as wheelchair users. If there is a wheelchair, scooter or walker user who lives in or regularly visits your home, it's always a good idea to measure the amount of turning space he or she requires, and design accordingly.

#### Evacuation

When planning spaces, think about how you would get out of the house in an emergency, such as a fire. There should be a clear and direct route to an outdoor place of safety from all floors. If stairs are a challenge for a member of your family or a visitor, a balcony or basement walk-out can be an area of relative safety to await

evacuation assistance. For more information about fire safety, see CMHC's *About Your House* fact sheet, *Accessible Housing by Design—Fire Safety* for You and Your Home.

#### **DESIGN ELEMENTS**

### Hallways and foyers

Entrance foyers, mud rooms and the hallways that connect the living spaces within a house are important elements in the creation of a universally accessible home. Hallways should provide space for approach and use. Hallways are preferably at least 1,220 mm (48 in.) wide, but should never be less than 915 mm (36 in.). Ideally, all doors along hallways should be at least 915 mm (36 in.) wide, although narrower doors may be acceptable if the hallway is at least 1,220 mm (48 in.) wide—see the following section, "Doors."

If there is a wheelchair, scooter or walker user who lives in or regularly visits your home, a turn-around space should be considered at entrance areas and foyers and at the ends of hallways where a closed or locked door may be encountered. A circular turning space of 1,525 mm (60 in.)

diameter will accommodate most users; however, more space may be required for larger mobility devices such as scooters. The turn-around space may be omitted at the end of hallways if the door can be left open and there is turning space available within the room.

#### Doors

The most accessible doorway is one without a door. To enhance your home's accessibility, consider omitting doors that are not really necessary.

#### How wide should a door be?

Doors should provide at least 810 mm (32 in.) of **clear passage width** when they are open, but a clear space of at least 860 mm (34 in.) is better. Installing a 915 mm (36 in.) wide door will usually provide the recommended clear passage width. Check with your municipal building department for recommended door sizes.

## Designer Tip

If there is not enough room to install a 915 mm (36 in.) wide hinged door, the use of offset hinges on an 865 mm (34 in.) or 810 mm (32 in.) door will maximize the available clear passage width.

## What types of doors are available?

Hinged doors are by far the most common type. They are inexpensive and easy to use, but should have some clear floor space next to the door handle so that the door can be opened without having to step back (or wheel back) at the same time. A clear space of at least 600 mm (24 in.) is recommended at the latch side of the door on the pull side and 300 mm (12 in.) on the push side (see Figure 3).

Other door types to consider, particularly if there is not enough space to provide the necessary clearances for hinged doors, are sliding doors, pocket doors, bi-fold doors and accordion doors (see Figure 4).

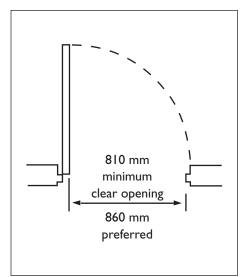


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure 2 Clear passage width

## What type of door handles and locks should I use?

A door handle and lock that can be operated using only one hand, without tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist, is recommended. Lever door handles are a great solution for everyone, whether it's a senior with arthritis, a child with small hands, or an adult with arms full of grocery bags.

Push-button locking mechanisms are much easier to use than those that incorporate keys or small turning mechanisms.

New technologies are available that can unlock and open a

door with a remote control device. Slide-bolt locks can also provide a universal design solution, as long as the bolt slides easily and is not too small. However, slide-bolt locks are not usually designed to be opened from the outside in an emergency... so they may not be the best choice for a bathroom or child's bedroom.

Placing a parcel shelf next to exterior doors is inexpensive and useful, allowing users to place items they are carrying on the shelf, freeing their hands to unlock and open the door.

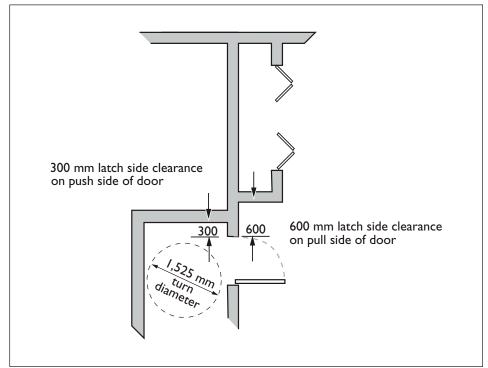


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure 3 Clear floor space at doors

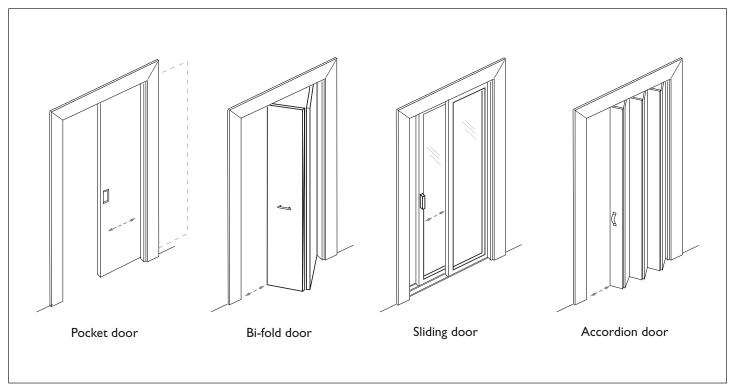


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure 4 Common door types

# Should I consider glass doors?

Fully glazed doors, or smaller glass **vision panels** within doors, are frequently used to bring light into a room. They also enhance safety and security by allowing users to see if there is anyone on the other side of the door. People who are deaf or hard of hearing also appreciate windows in doors so they can see if someone is approaching.

Fully glazed doors should not be installed near areas where falls are likely, such as at a flight of stairs, and should always be made of laminated glass so they don't shatter into sharp pieces if broken. If a fully glazed door features clear or lightly tinted glass, put a decal on the glass at eye level (1,350–1,525 mm or 53–60 in. from the floor) to visually alert users that it is a glass door.

On doors with glass panels, the lowest edge of the glass should be no higher than 915 mm (36 in.) so seated persons and smaller persons (including children) can see through the panels.

## Other things to consider

- Ideally, door **thresholds** should be levelled, but never more than 6 mm (½ in.) high. Where not levelled, the threshold should be bevelled so it isn't a tripping hazard.
- Some doors, such as those from a garage to a house, have self-closing devices that some people find difficult to use. Install a self-closing device with a delay-closing feature that will keep the door fully open for a few seconds before starting to close.

- family who does not have the reach, strength or dexterity to open doors or use a lock, consider installing power door operators. These devices can unlock and open doors with a push-plate or remote control. If you are using push-plates, be sure to place them so they are easy to reach and out of the way of the door when it is opening.
- If the bottom of your doors are scuffed, scratched and damaged as a result of people using their feet or wheelchair footrests to open the door, consider installing a 305 mm (12 in.) high kick plate on both sides of the door.
- Consider painting doors in a colour that contrasts with the wall surfaces to make

doors easier to identify in low light and for people with low vision. Similarly, choose door handles that contrast in colour with the door.

#### Windows

Windows are used to bring light and fresh air into rooms, and they come in many shapes, sizes and styles (see Figure 5). When choosing a window, first consider its size.

Windows should be large enough to bring sufficient light into a room but not so large that they create over-illumination and glare. Consider using adjustable blinds or curtains to control light levels. Over-illumination and glare are of particular concern for older people, as they can "wash out" the features of a room, making

obstacles and tripping hazards difficult to see.

If the primary purpose of a window is to provide views to the outdoors, the sill height of the window should be carefully considered. Will the window be used by small people, such as children, or from a seated position, such as on a sofa or in a wheelchair? Is there a benefit from having the sill low enough to see out the window when lying in bed? The recommended sill height for viewing from a seated position is no higher than 765 mm (30 in.), and no higher than 610 mm (24 in.) from a horizontal position. Note: If the window is operable, be sure to use safety locks and limit the opening space to ensure that a child cannot climb through.

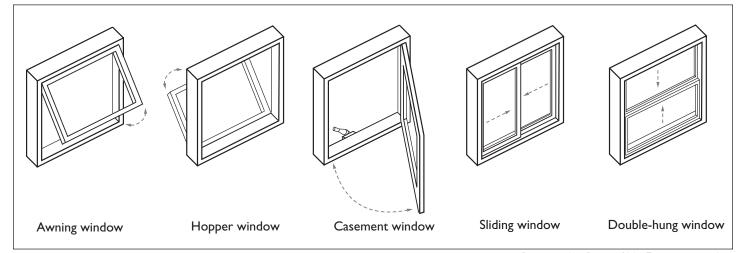


Figure 5 Common window types

Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Consider the usability of a window—particularly the opening and locking mechanisms. Casement, awning and hopper windows can be opened with one hand using a crank handle or lever, and the opening and locking mechanisms are usually easy to reach. Some casement windows have locks at both the top and bottom of the window. If someone in your family has limited reaching abilities, ask the supplier to provide a linkage bar to allow both locks to be operated from the bottom.

Sliding windows are also a good choice as they are usually easy to reach and open. However, larger sliding windows (and sliding patio doors) can be heavy and may not be the best choice for someone with limited strength. Note that double-hung windows typically require fine finger control and the use of two hands to open.

Some window manufacturers make windows that can be opened with a remote control. See CMHC's *About Your House* fact sheet, *Accessible Housing by Design—Home Automation*.

Window opening and locking mechanisms should be between 610 and 1,220 mm (24 and 48 in.) from the floor, with a clear floor space in front so people can use the controls without reaching over furniture. If someone in your family or a frequent visitor uses a wheelchair or scooter, consider providing at least 760 x 1,220 mm (30 x 48 in.) of clear space in front of the window controls. Window openers and locks are easier to see if they are colour-contrasted with the window frame.

Some types of windows are much easier to clean from the inside than others. Be sure to ask the supplier about ease of cleaning and, if possible, try out the window cleaning features in the showroom.

### Cabinets and storage

In planning shelving, storage units, display units and other built-in cabinets, consider the different heights and reaching abilities of family members and the fact that these abilities change as children grow and adults age. Adjustable shelving

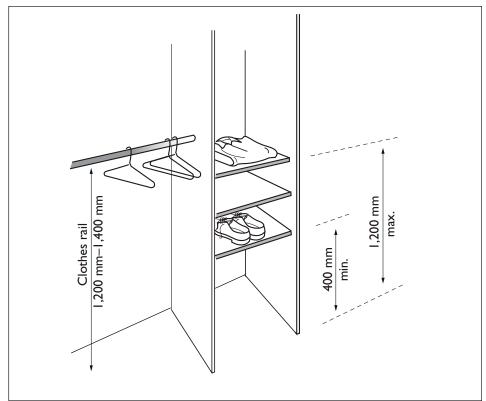


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure 6 Optimal reach ranges for storage

and storage systems can be customized and changed as necessary. Avoid cabinets and other storage systems that require the use of step stools.

If there is someone in your family or a frequent visitor who uses a wheelchair, maximize storage options within 400–1,200 mm (16–47 in.) reach, which is a comfortable range from a seated position (see Figure 6). Remember to leave space in front of storage units to allow a wheelchair or scooter to get close.

Choose cabinet hardware (drawer pulls, locks, door pulls and so on) that can be operated with one hand, without tight grasping, pinching or twisting of the wrist. Large D-shaped handles work well for most people, as do **touch latches**. Pull-out shelving and drawer storage are excellent choices, as they are easier for everyone to use.

Colour-contrast enhances accessibility for people with low vision—and for everyone when lighting levels are low. Contrasting-coloured door handles are easier to locate. A light-coloured top surface makes objects easier to see. Consider painting the wall a

contrasting colour to the top surface of the cabinets. A contrasting strip at the front of the top surface is also useful for identifying the edge.

#### **Furniture**

Although most furniture is not intended to be used for support, it is often used that way. Choose furniture that is sturdy and stable.

If someone in your family or a visitor has difficulty in getting up from a seated position, consider providing at least one seat with a seat height of 450–500 mm (18–20 in.). The seat should have a firm cushion or pad and stable armrests.

Choosing height-adjustable furniture is an excellent idea as it allows the furniture to be customized to meet the specific needs of the user. It also provides the flexibility to deal with future changes in ability.

While the primary decision on the colour and finish of furniture will always be based on personal preference and taste, consider also the visibility of furniture. If the floors, walls and furniture are all the same colour, they can be difficult to see in low lighting or by a person with low vision.

If there is someone in your family or a frequent visitor who uses a wheelchair, be sure to consider space for the wheelchair user to sit. Remember that some wheelchair users like to transfer into a comfortable chair and will need transfer space next to the chair.

# Lighting and other electrical considerations

Lighting contributes greatly to the ambiance and aesthetic quality of the home, and provides light for paths of travel, safety and security. Appropriate lighting is particularly important for people who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, as it makes lip-reading easier. The use of dimmer switches is an excellent way to adjust a room's ambience while still allowing the space to be brighter for those who need it.

For maximum safety, lighting should be bright and consistent—especially along hallways and at stairs. To enhance safety and convenience, consider providing permanent nightlighting along hallways at bedrooms and bathrooms. Linear LED lighting is a good choice for this type of lighting.

If the space features glossy floor, wall or ceiling surfaces, glare can be a problem, particularly for older people. Ideally, glossy surfaces should be changed to matte surfaces. Otherwise, choose indirect lighting sources to minimize glare.

Table and floor lamps enhance lighting levels at reading areas and writing surfaces. Having plenty of electrical outlets, evenly distributed around a room, minimizes the chances of tripping over cables and extension cords.

Install light switches in places where people can find them

easily when they enter the room. Wheelchair or scooter users will require clear floor space of 760 x 1,220 mm (30 x 48 in.) in front of light switches. Controls installed 860–960 mm (34–38 in.) from the floor are usable by most people.

#### **Acoustics**

Acoustics can help or hinder the ability to hear people talking, the television or the door bell. If a room will be used by a family member or visitor who is hearingimpaired, a quiet environment is desirable. Rooms with a lot of hard surfaces and nonupholstered furniture can be very noisy from background noises and reflected sounds. Adding "soft" elements to the room, such as carpets, draperies, upholstered furniture and acoustic ceiling tiles will improve the space's acoustic quality.

Other design considerations that can create a quieter environment include:

- minimizing background noise from mechanical equipment by choosing quiet equipment;
- using sound-dampening installation practices;
- soundproofing walls and ceilings;
- installing soundproof doors and windows;
- placing noisy exterior equipment, such as air conditioners, far from windows and doors.

A room used by a family member or visitor who has low vision or is blind and uses reflected sound to assist with orientation needs to be "acoustically alive." "Hard" elements such as ceramic flooring or metal panelling enhance reflected sounds.

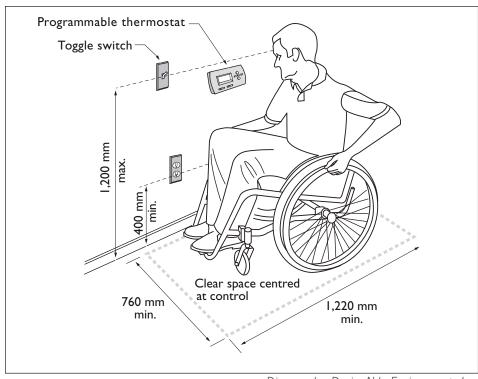


Diagram by: DesignAble Environments Inc.

Figure 7 Optimal reach range for controls

#### Colour considerations

As mentioned previously, the appropriate use of colour contrast can enhance accessibility for everyone and particularly for people with low vision. Colour contrast can help identify and differentiate paths of travel, activity areas, furniture, built-in elements, potential hazards and the location of switches and controls.

#### Materials and finishes

The choice of materials and finishes within a home is very much based on aesthetics, personal preference and cost. But there are also functional and environmental issues to consider. Environmental issues include the material's impact on the environment and on the indoor air quality of your home.

Table 1 on page 12 outlines the functional characteristics of finish materials and how those characteristics can affect usability. Examples are provided of suitable materials for specific applications but keep in mind that a wide array of materials is available, with new materials and finishes being introduced almost daily. Choose materials carefully and ask your supplier for information about their characteristics.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

#### **Books**

Baldrica, N. (2003). The Accessible Home: Updating Your Home for Changing Physical Needs. Chanhassen, MN: Creative Publishing International.

Barrier Free Environments Inc. (1991). *The Accessible Housing Design File*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Leibrock, C., & Terry, J. E. (1999). *Beautiful Universal Design: A Visual Guide*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

NAHB Research Center and ToolBase Services. (2006). 2006 Directory of Accessible Building Products. Upper Marlboro, MD: NAHB Research Center.

Steven Winters Associates. (1997). Accessible Housing by Design: Universal Design Principles in Practice.
New York: McGraw-Hill.

Wylde, M. (1994). Building for a Lifetime: *The Design and Construction of Fully Accessible Homes*. Newtown, CT: Taunton Press.

#### Websites

Concrete Change (May 2010) www.concretechange.org

The Center for Universal
Design (May 2010)
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/
cud/

The Design Linc— Accessibility Design & Resources (May 2010) http://www.designlinc.com/ destips.htm

Institute for Human Centered Design—Adaptive Environments (May 2010) www.adaptenv.org

Table I Key characteristics of materials and finishes

Characteristic		Considerations		
Slip-resistance	Floor	Choose finishes that are slip-resistant. Choices include low-pile carpet, hardwood, laminate, vinyl, PVC, resin, rubber, matte and/or textured ceramics, cork and linoleum. In areas that can become wet, ensure slip-resistance is maintained when the floor is wet. Choices include enhanced slip-resistance resin and PVC, profiled and/or matte ceramics and clay tiles.		
Smoothness	Floor	Smoother floor finishes require less effort to walk or wheel across than textured finishes—although very smooth finishes can be hazardous. Materials that reduce the level of effort include hardwood, laminate, vinyl, PVC, resin, ceramics, cork and linoleum. The smoothness of flooring will affect its slipresistance, glare, tactile identification, acoustic quality and ease of maintenance.		
	Wall	Along walking routes avoid very abrasive wall finishes, such as textured concrete, exposed brick or profiled wood. The smoothness of a wall surface will affect its glare, acoustic quality and ease of maintenance.		
	Ceiling	The smoothness of a ceiling surface will affect its glare, acoustic quality and ease of maintenance.		
Resilience	Floor	<b>Resilient surfaces</b> may reduce injury from falls and are less susceptible to impact damage. Choices include low-pile carpet, cushioned vinyl, PVC, resin, rubber, cork and linoleum.		
	Wall	If falls are anticipated in a particular space, or if family members are susceptible to injuring themselves, consider cushioned or padded wall finishes. Choices include low-pile carpet, cushioned fabric and cork.		
Colour	Floor	Contrasting colours help identify primary routes and functional areas. Locations for the colour contrast include wall-floor borders along hallways, borders within spaces, borders between spaces, and at potential hazards.		
	Wall	Use contrasting colours to help identify architectural components for people with low vision—a reality for many older people. Locations include wall-floor, wall-ceiling, wall-door, door-handle, wall-switch, and wall-outlet.		
	Ceiling	Consider colour contrast to further define primary routes and functional areas.		
Tactile identification	Floor	Use textural contrast to help people with low vision or the blind to identify primary routes and functional areas. Locations include borders along hallways; textured borders within spaces; textured borders or different textures between spaces; and textured borders or different textures at potential hazards. Finishes include carpet-hardwood, carpet-vinyl, hardwood-ceramic, and carpet-ceramic.		
	Wall	Use textural contrast to identify primary routes and functional areas. Chair rails and changes in wall finishes can help define routes and areas.		

Glare	Floor	Use matte and low-gloss finishes. Avoid highly polished surfaces, particularly near large expanses of glass or direct overhead lighting.	
	Wall	Use matte and low-gloss finishes. Avoid highly polished surfaces and mirrored walls.	
	Ceiling	Use matte and low-gloss finishes. Avoid highly polished surfaces.	
Acoustic quality	Floor	An "acoustically deadened" environment eliminates unwanted background noise which helps people who are hard of hearing. Floor materials that help suppress background noise include carpet, cork, textured ceramics, and rubber.	
		An "acoustically alive" environment helps people with low vision or the blind who use reflected sound to assist with orientation. Floor materials that enhance reflected sound include hardwood, ceramics, laminates, granite, and marble.	
	Wall	Wall materials that help create an "acoustically deadened" environment include carpet, cork, textured ceramics, fabric or rubber.	
		Wall materials that help create an "acoustically alive" environment include glazed ceramics, metals, laminates, granite, and marble.	
	Ceiling	Ceiling materials that help create an "acoustically deadened" environment include textured gypsum board and lay-in acoustic tile.	
		Ceiling materials that help create an "acoustically alive" environment include painted gypsum board, sheet metals, and pre-finished lay-in tiles.	
Ease of maintenance	Floor	Choose finish materials that require minimal maintenance, for example, no-wax hardwoods, vinyl, PVC, ceramics, or laminates.	
	Wall	Choose finish materials that require minimal maintenance, such as vinyl wall coverings, ceramics, metals, granite, panelling, gloss-painted gypsum board, pre-finished gypsum board, and marble. If someone in your family or a frequent visitor uses a wheelchair, consider kick plates and corner guards along hallways and other high-traffic areas to minimize damage from footrests.	
	Ceiling	Choose finish materials that require minimal maintenance, such as painted gypsum board and pre-finished sheet or board materials.	

### Glossary

Clear passage width: The clear opening width that is available when a door is in its open position.

**Resilient surface:** a relatively firm surface that can reshape itself back to its original surface profile after it is compressed.

**Threshold:** The sill of a doorway, usually a shaped piece of metal, wood or stone placed beneath a door.

**Touch latches:** Cabinet hardware that is activated by simply pushing the door (it also latches the door by simply pushing it closed).

Vision panel: A glazed panel (window) within a door.

**Visitable housing:** Housing that incorporates basic accessibility features that will allow a visitor who uses a wheelchair to access and enter the house, move through the entry level and have basic access to toilet facilities.

## The Principles of Universal Design

Universal design is defined as:

"The design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design."

The concept is an evolving design philosophy.

## Principle 1: Equitable use

This principle focuses on providing equitable access for everyone in an integrated and dignified manner. It implies that the design is appealing to everyone and provides an equal level of safety for all users.

#### Principle 2: Flexibility in use

This principle implies that the design of the house or product has been developed considering a wide range of individual preferences and abilities throughout the life cycle of the occupants.

#### Principle 3: Simple and intuitive

The layout and design of the home and devices should be easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience or cognitive ability. This principle requires that design elements be simple and work intuitively.

### Principle 4: Perceptible information

The provision of information using a combination of different modes, whether using visual, audible or tactile methods, will ensure that everyone is able to use the elements of the home safely and effectively. Principle 4 encourages the provision of information through all of our senses—sight, hearing and touch—when interacting with our home environment.

## Principle 5: Tolerance for error

This principle incorporates a tolerance for error, minimizing the potential for unintended results. This implies design considerations that include fail-safe features and gives thought to how all users may use the space or product safely.

## Principle 6: Low physical effort

This principle deals with limiting the strength, stamina and dexterity required to access spaces or use controls and products.

## Principle 7: Size and space for approach and use

This principle focuses on the amount of room needed to access space, equipment and controls. This includes designing for the appropriate size and space so that all family members and visitors can safely reach, see and operate all elements of the home.

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Priced Publications	
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FlexHousing <sup>TM</sup> : The Professional's Guide	Order No. 61844
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Design Options for Barrier-Free and Adaptable Housing	Order No. 63909
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Measuring the Effort Needed to Climb Access Ramps in a Manual Wheelchair	Order No. 63916

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