

Universal Architectural Design and People with Disabilities

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Universal Design (UD) in the built environment benefits everyone—women and men, older adults and children, people with disabilities and those without, people using different languages. The Global Universal Design Commission (GUDC), along with the architecture and design, development, and disability and aging communities, is accelerating adoption of UD concepts.

Never before in modern history have the civil and human rights of people with disabilities aligned so well with fast-moving developments in inclusive and universal architectural design. These developments have opened up **unprecedented opportunities for participation in society for persons with disabilities, older adults, and others**. The 2008 United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), ratified by almost two hundred nations among the first of which was Ecuador, is ensuring the equal enjoyment of all human rights by persons with disabilities, such as individuals with long-term physical and cognitive impairments.

Among its protections, the CRPD (Article 9, Accessibility) established **the right of persons with disabilities to participate on an equal basis with others in the physical built environment**. The CRPD requires State parties take measures to develop and monitor minimal standards for architectural accessibility.

Beyond minimal physical accessibility, however, architectural Universal Design (UD) increases the usability, and safety and health, of buildings. UD is a paradigm for design of the built environment to address human diversity and increase architectural access to the maximum extent. The **Global Universal Design Commission (GUDC)**, a not-for-profit corporation, was established to increase understanding and use of UD. With involvement of the design, development, disability, and aging communities, the GUDC is accelerating adoption of UD concepts that move beyond focus on minimal accessibility compliance to a vision of architectural design that provides ease of use without disadvantage to any group or individuals, and to the greatest

extent possible without the need for adaptation, retrofitting, and specialized design. UD has been shown to broaden markets and **increases consumer satisfaction** because it addresses preferences of all types.

Ambassador Dr Luis Gallegos is Honorary Chairman of the GUDC, and the Congress of Ecuador has honoured him for his leadership in the promotion of Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities. As Chairman of the GUDC, I am joined by founding members such as Edward Steinfeld, Director of the Center for Inclusive Design & Environmental Access, Graham Hill, a former member of the US National Council for Disability, and Josh Heintz, an internationally distinguished environmental attorney.

The GUDC has developed **voluntary consensus UD standards for commercial buildings** to guide corporations and government entities in the creation of barrier-free facilities, and to provide diverse users with access to commerce, public services, entertainment, and employment opportunities. The GUDC objective is to demonstrate that **buildings designed with UD standards benefit everyone**, including the millions of people living with disabilities worldwide and the growing aging population. Businesses likewise stand to reap benefits from the use of UD, including an increase in consumer base, customer loyalty and an expanded labour pool. The GUDC guidelines are based on a decade of extensive research and are expected to be the new standard for UD in architecture and construction.

Recently, in December 2015, the Mary Free Bed YMCA in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, became **the first building in world to receive formal GUDC Certification**. Michael Perry served as the project's lead architect, along with a team of architects, engineers and designers who worked closely with the GUDC. The new YMCA is a model for community, recreational, and rehabilitation facilities, and was designed to be an inclusive environment for people of all abilities. Among its UD features, the new YMCA includes expanded accessible parking for bicycles, scooters and hand cycles, wider walking paths, hard surface viewing areas for wheelchairs of outdoor fields, oversized elevator cars with horizontal call buttons with braille, and a bold-coloured UD feature ramp for primary vertical circulation. Colour schemes and lighting also provide cues to people with all types of visual ability. The buildings wayfinding system is UD designed along with its acoustic techniques such as sound dampening and sound-absorbing ceiling bubbles. The facility locker rooms have ergonomically designed equipment, and there are zero-entry roll-in showers and pull-down benches, self-operated transfer

stations at the swimming pools, and wheelchair softball fields. There is not a single step throughout the 120.000 square feet building on its thirty-six acre campus.

At its best, **UD facilitates equal participation in society by all**. The objectives of UD will not be achieved by government mandates, standards promulgation, and commercial successes alone. Rather, fundamental advancement in inclusive architecture and UD derives from the changing attitudes and expectations for equal participation by all in society. The question we must ask is not what the world would be like without UD architecture, but why we would choose to live in a world without it?