

“Destiny Arms,” a Global Universal Design Commission Living Laboratory

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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. This article highlights the “Destiny Arms” apartment complex in Syracuse, New York USA, as the Global Universal Design Commission’s (GUDC) latest living laboratory for UD.

In 2016, we wrote about how 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 access to the maximum extent. The Global Universal Design Commission (GUDC), a not-for-profit corporation, aims to increase understanding and use of UD in collaboration with the design, development, disability, and aging communities. Our partners include Ambassador Dr. Luis Gallegos, who is Honorary Chairman of the GUDC, and other prominent Ecuadorians leading in the promotion of the human rights of persons with disabilities and older adults.

In our prior article, we discussed the GUDC’s voluntary consensus UD standards for commercial buildings, used as a guide to corporations and government entities in the creation of barrier-free facilities. We highlighted the Mary Free Bed YMCA in Grand Rapids, Michigan USA, opened in 2015 as the first building in world to receive formal GUDC Certification (see <http://www.globaluniversaldesign.org/>). This YMCA includes an array of UD features, which the GUDC is now studying in terms of monetary costs and benefits, usage patterns, and consumer satisfaction.

“Destiny Arms” apartment complex in Syracuse, New York USA, opened in 2017, is GUDC’s latest living laboratory for UD. As in the prior YMCA project, this building reflects the developer’s commitment to UD throughout the structure, site, and each individual living unit. In renovating the complex, formerly a 110-year-old washing machine factory, the developers have installed an array of UD features, most of which go unnoticed by design during a tour of the location of the sixty-two living units. Destiny Arm’s uniqueness and innovativeness shows how UD helps create living and communal spaces that balance aesthetics, access and inclusion, while also adding convenience and substantial amenity.

All of Destiny Arms’ halls and doorways are wider than standard compliance measures—a subtle feature that is worth highlighting because in-practice this adds value for renters and users. For a person living in Destiny Arms who uses a personal wheeled mobility device (PWMD), as does

one of us (a small portable scooter, Pride Go Go Elite), the wider halls and doorways make the entire space more usable. Destiny Arms surpasses standard minimum planning and space requirements, ensuring a user of even the largest mobility device usable access. Turning around, fitting through doorways, and exiting/entering, becomes easier, while access to communal spaces, bedrooms, and bathrooms becomes simpler and less awkward. Users of PWMD move around in the building's spaces more comfortably, which also adds a subtle bit of inclusion and social opportunity that many built environments do not offer.

The upper floor hallways of Destiny Arms are even wider—more than 1.5 meters—to accommodate two large mobility devices (substantial, wide power chairs for example) parked side by side. PWMD users do not have to “pull over” to let a fellow tenant pass. Both parties may remain in motion, which in its own subtle way creates better inclusion through positive social interaction. Inside the apartment units, the almost one-meter entries enable easy access. Kitchens and connected main living spaces provide ample turnaround despite the large, 110-year-old columns.

In addition, a secure entry process is available for people of diverse ability levels. Destiny Arms features an entry system that not only allows low-input admittance to the building, but also it allows for a degree of customization. Tenants have a key fob or small RFID sensor. As a tenant approaches the building, the entry door recognizes the individual user to unlock, unlatch, and open. Depending on the individual level of support needed, the door remains open for a pre-specified amount of time. The entry process is simpler and easier for users of all ages, and for those who may have physical or cognitive conditions. The entry system also summons the elevator for the particular unit, further aiding in seamless entry. Tenants of across the life span are accommodated individually and seamlessly, as an amenity for all.

The GUDC is conducting a new case study of the benefits of UD at Destiny Arms for persons across the spectrum of physical and cognitive disability. For example, how do the UD features add to living convenience and quality of social interactions within the complex? What are the individualized benefits of UD amenities to all younger and older individuals, such as roll in showers, larger bathrooms, web-based electronically controlled mechanical window shades and doors, and kitchen sinks and counters that may be easily lowered to provide better access for those with mobility and dexterity impairments? Lastly, what is the positive return of investment to the developer for building UD?

The GUDC's ongoing case studies will further document the business and social case for UD approaches that exceed minimum building compliance, may be voluntarily adopted, and stimulate community inclusion, participation, and quality of life, for all people across the life span.