

# Good design equals access for all

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Access for people with disabilities can no longer be an afterthought. The *Commonwealth, Disability Discrimination Act 1992* (DDA) requires that people with disabilities be given equal opportunity to participate in and contribute to all social, political and cultural activities.

The Building Code of Australia (BCA) requirements for access to people with a disability are outlined by Standards Australia. These are listed in a free brochure *Standards for people with disabilities*, published by Standards Australia in July 1997.

The importance of considering special needs when designing all public buildings is clearly outlined in *Standards for people with disabilities*:

*Creating a public building that is accessible in the spirit of the DDA means that it must be useable by people with disabilities, who may be workers in the building, visitors to it ... If the furniture and fitments, internal finishes, signage, communication equipment and materials are not useable by a variety of people with different disabilities, the building may not be considered accessible ... There is a view that if we get the building right for people with disabilities we get it right for the rest of the population. This is the concept of universal access.*

Consider the following scenario: a patron who uses a wheelchair points out that she is having problems using the library.

Is it that the shelves are too high? No, she can reach the books with an 'easy reacher' or with assistance from staff. Is the entry door too heavy, is there no ramp to the building, is there not enough room to manoeuvre a wheelchair? No, she says, none of these reasons is causing the problem.

She has been able to enter the library on a ramp of Australian Standard gradient, the doors open automatically, the carpet is compact, not spongy, there is adequate space for manoeuvring the wheelchair, and there is signage indicating wheelchair-accessible toilets. These toilets have a full set of rails and doors which open outwards. A few library desks housing the OPACs, CD-ROMs and Internet are height-adjustable. One computer even has an accessible mouse and expanded keyboard. The service desks have a lower service-point or are built within the zone of common reach

and have adequate clear space to accommodate the wheelchair. The reading room also has a photocopier at an accessible height, a microfilm reader with controls at the bottom and one for left-handed use.

So what was the problem? It was really very simple: there are no bookends, which causes books to fall when removing items from the shelves. This problem, when so easily fixed, will benefit not only this patron, but also other patrons and indeed the library staff.

All disability-access features provide benefits for the whole community. Compact carpet, low-gradient ramps and automatic doors have obvious advantages for delivery persons, anyone pushing a pram or the elderly. Similarly, lower service-points benefit children and shorter adults.

So what impact does the DDA have on the design of libraries? Many librarians, when constructing new buildings or when taking on refurbishments, have worked closely with their local government access committees in making sure the access needs of people with disabilities are met. Having a library staff member on the access committee is a valuable way of consulting with the community. For example, the Manly City Library, built in 1995, included many key access features including a talking lift, accessible toilets, automatic doors, ramp access, wheelchair-accessible service counters, an audio loop for the hearing-impaired and wheelchair-accessible parking bays. Many local governments have written action plans under the Disability Discrimination Act. Guidelines on writing these action plans are available at <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/disabil>. This website also gives details of the relationship between the DDA and BCA and examples of cases

which have been brought to court under the DDA.

Recently, the State Library of New South Wales Reference Library Reading Room installed a new one-stop service point with an uninterrupted path of travel and open-ended bookshelves. This simplified service for all patrons including those with a disability. Other improvements to physical access at the State Library of NSW include an additional accessible set of lift buttons in the historic Mitchell Building, visual markings on the edge of the marble staircase, audio loops in function rooms and service desks, and a portable ramp for access to the Metcalfe Auditorium stage.

Libraries have the opportunity when planning refurbishments or new buildings to provide improved access to the whole community, including the eighteen per cent of the population with a disability. Hopefully this will be done to achieve universal access — and not because decision-makers fear possible litigation under the DDA. Getting access right at the planning and building stage is much easier and cheaper than trying to rectify the problems at a later stage.

The following Australian websites provide further information regarding the DDA and building access — Disability Information and Resource Centre of South Australia [<http://www.dircsa.org.au>]; Independent Living Centre Western Australia [<http://www.iinet.com.au/~ilcwa/ilc.html>]; Victoria's Network Disability Page [<http://www.vicnet.net.au/disability>].

The State Library of NSW Disability Access Service of NSW is committed to the improvement of access to all library and information services for people with a disability and can be contacted at [access@ilinet.slnsw.gov.au](mailto:access@ilinet.slnsw.gov.au). ■

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