2 Using Universal Design Guidelines

This guidebook purposely avoids recommending prescriptive design standards for the universal design of buildings. Instead, it provides general guidelines designed to broaden and enhance the usability of buildings for everyone.

This guidebook’s visual illustrations of successful applications of certain universal design guidelines are not meant to be copied or imitated. Rather, they are provided to promote a general understanding of the concept - i.e., to stimulate extension of the principles to other building applications.

Audience for this Guidebook

Universal design guidelines can be applied to the planning, design and management of all buildings - private as well as public. This guidebook, however, is targeted primarily at three groups with whom the city’s various departments routinely contract for services pertaining to public buildings: (1) professional designers, (2) building owners and developers and (3) general contractors and construction managers. It is intended to demonstrate how each of these audiences can use the guidelines to further both the city’s and their own professional interests.
Figure 2.1. One of the target audiences for this guidebook is professional designers.

Figure 2.2. A second target audience for this guidebook is building owners and developers.

**Professional Designers**

Universal design is a rapidly expanding area of practice in all the design professions. The growing need to design buildings that are usable by everyone regardless of their intellectual, functional or sensory abilities is a demographic fact of life. This guidebook introduces professional designers to principles of universal design that will enable them to rise to the challenges posed by that demographic.

Moreover, universal design contributes to the socially and ethically responsible design of buildings. It promotes replacement of our current discriminatory exclusive designs with new affirming inclusive designs that are usable by all of us. And it does this without burdening the professional designer with prescriptive standards that stifle design innovation. The benefits of universal design are best achieved by reinforcing design innovation rather than design imitation, or worse, design duplication.

**Building Owners and Developers**

Universal design provides building owners and developers with ways to maximize their buildings’ responsiveness to an increasingly diverse marketplace. Buildings that are not usable by everyone grow more marginalized with each passing day and, consequently, tend to lose their relative value. Through these Guidelines, building owners and developers should be able to discover that universal design has become a cost-effective strategy for maintaining or even enhancing the profitability of their building inventories.

Building construction, renovation and maintenance costs are more readily justified when all people benefit. A primary benefit of universal design is that it enhances the usability of buildings for everyone. Consequently, building owners and managers who embrace the principles of universal design are less likely to see their decision-making during construction, renovation and maintenance
projects become the targets of “penny wise and pound foolish” criticisms following their completion.

**General Contractors and Construction Managers**

This guidebook illustrates practical universal design solutions in many contexts. They can help contractors and construction managers keep the intent of universal design in mind as they respond to conditions encountered during construction.

More importantly, the examples and guidelines provide a broad understanding of how application of the principles of universal design at a construction site can ensure the realization of a building that is truly usable by everyone – and, typically, at a cost that is competitive with conventional design and construction methods.

**Evaluation and Improvement Over Time**

Universal design is a continuous process of innovation targeted at improving buildings’ usability for everyone regardless of their intellectual, functional and sensory abilities. And as with any design, improvement upon the status quo is always possible. But with universal design, the motivation to continually enhance the usability of a building is ever present.

| A universally designed building is as much about becoming universally usable as it is about being universally usable. |

It is through post-occupancy evaluations of buildings that universal design principles are most readily tested and documented. Through such evaluations, even our best current examples of universal design in buildings will, over time, be challenged and replaced by better examples.

Whether through construction, renovation or maintenance projects, buildings designed to reflect the principles of universal design are
part of a continuous process of innovation. This process is targeted at improving usability of buildings and cities over time.