

The Importance of Psychological & Physical Access

Having a disability has really opened my eyes to so much access discrimination not just for a person with disability but the aged, mothers and fathers with young families, yes ordinary folk – it is my disability that has shown me a better way. I have learnt to pick my battles and my ultimate goal is to improve life/accessibility for all. I personally have a criteria for any issues I pursue – I always have a solution or create a conversation to help towards a solution, I try to consider cost and explain that it is more economical to do something right in the first place than try to retro fit and finally do everything out of love!

Yes it is me again - Meriel Stanger and I'm a person with quite severe disabilities – quadriplegia and vision impairment (to name a few) from a horse-riding accident in March 1995.

In August 2007 our Federal Government ratified United Nations Convention of Human Rights for Persons with Disability (CRPD) and many places have failed (unknowingly) on many counts <http://www.disabilityrightsnow.org.au/node/62>. People with disability are humans therefore deserve to be treated with dignity – prior to August 2007 people with disability were not considered human therefore had no human rights. Because of the lack of legislation, people with disability were subject to some hideous treatment and it wasn't against the law.

If a premise is difficult to physically access then the lasting psychological ramifications are enormous – the feelings of worthlessness and degradation, making one not feel a part of the community AND the loss of potential income for the business/premise concerned. With the introduction of the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) people with disability will have a discretionary income and therefore become a vital participant in creating a whole community.

I also believe that everyone should attempt to make a home visitable by all, whether it is an aging relative/friend or a relative/friend with young children reliant on a pram or person with disability or heaven forbid - you yourself have an accident leaving you temporarily or permanently incapacitated. People say things like 'that will never happen to me' or 'I'm not going to get old'.

Accidents do happen and will always happen – accidents are something one cannot plan for and it is not as though you throw some-one on the scrap heap because they are damaged. No, you decide that they deserve rehabilitation and an opportunity return to the real world no matter how hopeless it looks. You do this because you love them and want the best for them.

I'm quite fascinated that at any one time in the first world countries at least one third of the population is physically and psychologically vulnerable to access hurdles every day. Now, one would think that it would be a profitable tract to take for the building industry insist on doing what is required rather than do what is always done and ignore the need for such changes then I would have no need or axe to grind by writing this article but no, here I am again 'banging on' about the same old issues!

I watch many TV programmes about houses overseas and in Australia and view design through a disability accessibility lens. I imagine arriving at the home and assess whether it is visitable for me – never mind liveable! I would like to see the building industry wake up – as the population grows, more people will live longer, there will be more accidents and with the advancement in medical treatment, people will be surviving AND if I have anything to do with it – they will be not only surviving but thriving!! The people will be thriving because they will be able to create their own personal and accessible environment.

Builders and designers are to blame – they don't think! Programmes like The Block or House Rules never address these issues. The television stations are out to get viewers (so they can sell advertising) so until the issue of universal access can be made sexy, they will not change their format. The programmes make everything pretty and impractical. An accessible bathroom is made to look like a 'disable circus', nobody has bothered to create something aesthetically pleasing.

Recently a large building corporation/company advertised their business in the Spinal Injuries magazine showing a photograph of a two storey home with a set of seven steps to the front door! If they were hoping to get work from the readers of this magazine they certainly chose the wrong photograph of their work. To me, not a clever way of spending their advertising dollar.

There is a real need for legislation when it comes to access – right now Australia is pretty good when it comes to public buildings and space but I would like to see the last few barriers (like accessing the front door) in private dwellings be mandated in all new builds and renovations to be inclusive for all.

I'm fiercely independent and if I come across somewhere I can't be independent in the 21st century I feel violated. I go through my life dreaming, planning, making many repeated enquiries about access and whether it is successful, mediocre or disastrous; I learn from it and write about my experiences. I would like to acknowledge CRAFT for giving me a safe platform to express my views and for that I'm grateful.

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