

Universal Design: *How Philanthropic Investment Can Help Everyone*

A white paper by KC Communities for All Ages
and the First Suburbs Coalition

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Building Universal Design Momentum

On June 26, 2013, the Mid-America Regional Council sponsored a “Smart Design Workshop: Creating Housing and Communities for All” at the Sylvester Powell Jr. Community Center in Merriam, Kan. The event was funded by a Community AGEnda grant from Grantmakers In Aging and the Pfizer Foundation with local funding by the WJ Brace Charitable Trust, Bank of America, Trustee,

The program featured panelists representing diverse perspectives that rarely interact with one another. Moderator Dawn Taylor, executive director of AIA Kansas City, led a panel discussion that focused on how the built environment and products can be designed to better meet the needs of everyone. Panelists included:

- Peter H. Sloan Jr., AIA, RCID, Principal, 360 Architecture
- Katy Dodd, BSBA, CAPS, Home Modifications Coordinator, LifeWise Renovations
- Marsha G. Alexander, MS, HHS Housing and Environmental Design Specialist, University of Missouri Extension
- Brian McMillan, The Accessible Life
- Ann B. Stern, Homeowner

The workshop spotlighted universal design as a growing trend that accommodates individuals at all stages of life, from infants to grandparents. More and more, people are realizing that homes and communities that provide fewer restrictions on daily activities maximize independence and safety.

Why Universal Design Matters

So what is universal design and why should funders care about it?

Simply put, universal design improves the livability and visitability of homes, buildings and neighborhoods, not only for the elderly and disabled, but for every member of the community. Even the most able-bodied people pass through childhood, periods of temporary illness and injury, and old age. By designing for all abilities and stages of life, we can create inclusive environments, products and services that ensure that:

- Are safer, accessible, attractive and more desirable for ALL people to use.
- Can be easily repurposed for others to use (e.g., a home for elderly can fit the future needs of a person with disabilities or family with children).
- Eliminate barriers that lead to falls and related health expenses.
- Involve minimal additional cost when incorporated into construction.

Examples of Universal Design Features

- Open floor plan.
- Wider doorways and hallways.
- Raised electrical outlets and rocker-panel light switches.
- Zero-clearance entry into the house.
- Parking that does not include a curb between the driveway and walkway.
- Lighted entry and parking.
- Generously sized, roll-in showers with a slight slope in the floor to allow water to flow toward the drain.
- Bathtubs designed with a wide seat at the end, easing transfer from wheelchair to tub.
- Bathroom sink cabinets constructed with a removable lower cabinet or removable cabinet doors to allow wheelchair accessibility.
- Bathtub and shower controls that are located off center toward the room, making them easier to reach and operate from outside the tub or shower.
- Elevated, front-loading washer and dryer.
- Task lighting increasing illumination directly to the task at hand.
- Easy-to-reach appliance controls.

Overcoming Barriers to universal design

Peter Sloan, an architect and workshop panelist, admitted that his industry “has been poor at understanding that architecture is about serving people, not bricks and mortar.” He agreed with other panelists that the silo mentality that has persisted among architects, engineers, builders, interior designers, products manufacturers and even the medical/occupational therapy community continues to impede progress in universal design.

Another barrier has, ironically, been the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires many aspects of universal design. “If I was ADA-compliant — I thought I was good,” said Brian McMillan, who was a landscape architect before his spinal cord injury. Since 2010, he has devoted his time to The Accessible Life, a web-based consortium of individuals, designers, craftsmen, health care professionals and manufacturers who are pooling resources to improve quality of life for the mobility-impaired through universal design in residential settings.

Panelists agreed that focusing on ADA, in and of itself, has been a barrier to universal design.

“The reason universal design hasn’t been more widely adopted is because it got married to ADA and is seen as a need, not a want,” said McMillan. “The thinking has been ‘A tragedy has occurred, so I need this ramp’ or, ‘The government is going to make us do it,’ as opposed to wanting the ramp because of its multi-generational benefits, from the mother with the stroller to granddad in a wheelchair.

“I believe, one day, universal design will be like green sustainability. People will say, ‘I want that ramp.’”

What Funders Can Do

Funders — whatever their interest areas — are increasingly concerned about the livability of communities in which they support health, education, social services, arts and culture, religion, environment, and animals. By considering universal design in grantmaking, funders can address ALL of these interest areas, because people of all ages and abilities benefit.

The funding community — individuals, foundations and corporations — has a unique opportunity to change the dominant development paradigm in three ways: advocacy, money and awareness.

1) Advocate for Universal Design in Capital and Relocation Grants

Consider the Downtown Campus for the Arts (Kansas City, Mo.). What if funders made their support for this project — or any capital project — contingent upon incorporation of basic principles of universal design, such as:

Before Susie Can Participate...

Susie Haake, who as a toddler contracted polio, was the volunteer employee program manager for Hallmark prior to her retirement in 2008 and remains active in Kansas City as a community volunteer. However, Susie can’t participate in any program or event without first determining:

- Will it be held in a central location so she can get there via public transportation or Share-A-Fare?
- Can she get into the venue? If she chooses to drive, does the venue have ample accessible parking — preferably more than what is mandated — and a no-step entrance?
- Can she be an active participant in the event by staying throughout the session? Can she access the restroom? Is furniture generously spaced so she can sit anywhere instead of next to a doorway?
- If it’s at a private home — like many nonprofits events — is there a no-step entrance?

- Zero-step entries.
- Wider doorways, hallways and aisles.
- Appropriate ambient, task and accent lighting.

In addition to supporting the arts campus as a worthy cause, advocacy for universal design would make it far more likely that construction and interior design plans will result in safe, attractive, barrier-free environments that are better for everyone. It would also increase public awareness of the benefits of “doing it right.” After all, who doesn’t enjoy wider hallways and more pleasant lighting?

On a similar note, public and social benefit funders such as United Way could require agencies that seek funds to relocate their facilities to choose locations that exceed ADA standards. Additionally, funders could require or encourage agencies to seek out builders or remodelers who are Certified Aging-in-Place Specialists (CAPS).

2) Support Programs that Enable People to Stay in Their Homes

It’s easier and less costly to incorporate universal design from the ground up. Most people, however, do not have the resources to build new homes from scratch. Alternatives such as moving people into assisted living are even more costly. Yet, with 10 million people turning 65 every day between now and 2030, in addition to people with disabilities, popular demand for retrofitting of homes will skyrocket.

Funders can help meet this growing need by supporting nonprofits and programs that are working to facilitate “aging in place.” For example:

- **Habitat for Humanity** — Habitat organizations across the country build safe, decent, affordable homes for families in need who may not be able to afford retrofitting and later-stage modifications. Why not integrate universal design features into their homes from the beginning so they can “age in place?”
- **People Working Cooperatively** — PWC, based in Cincinnati, helps Ohio residents with critical home repairs, mobility modifications, energy conservation and weatherization and maintenance services (www.pwchomerepairs.org).
- **Metropolitan Lutheran Ministry** — MLM’s Minor Home Repair team volunteers in Kansas City, Mo., spend time each week doing safety and security repairs in the homes of low-income seniors and people with disabilities. Funds are needed only to purchase materials (www.mlmc.org).
- **HopeBUILDERS** — HopeBUILDERS helps people in the Kansas City metro area address accessibility needs and other similar problems. Funders can help financially or by donating project materials (www.hopebuilders-kc.org).

Will homes designed for “aging in place” be marketable? Apparently, yes. According to a June 2013 story in the *Raleigh News and Observer*, a North Carolina couple got four offers to buy their ADA-outfitted house the day it opened for a remodeler’s home tour.

3) Explore New Models

The Affordable Care Act has set goals to reduce preventable hospital readmissions. Section 3026 of the Act, the Community-Based Care Transitions Program, is testing models that encourage partnerships between community-based organizations and hospitals for improving care transitions from hospitals to other settings and reducing readmissions for Medicare beneficiaries.

Patients whose homes incorporate elements of universal design — such as zero-step entries, wide doorways and at least a half-bath on the first floor — have a better chance of being able to return to and remain in their homes. Supporting universal design is another way that funders, particularly those with interests in health and social services, can support improved transitions in care.

4) Honor Smart Design and Educate the Next Generation

As noted by Peter Sloan, the design industry’s most prestigious awards too often honor some of the least inclusive buildings. Funders could help change this mindset by establishing awards that recognize companies, organizations and projects that represent the best in universal design.

The ultimate answer, however, may lie in educating future generations. “If you want to change the world,” said design specialist Marcia Alexander, “you have to start with kids. Twenty years ago, we introduced the green movement in schools. The kids embraced it, and today it’s an integral part of their world. We need to do the same thing with universal design.”

Funders can accelerate the educational process by supporting the development and dissemination of instructional tools and reports (www.udeducation.org).

Your Welcoming Community

Dawn Taylor wrapped up MARC’s “Smart Design” workshop by sharing a call to action made by David Westbrook at an “Enlightened Accessible Design” seminar presented in May 2013 by the city of Kansas City, Mo., and AIA Kansas City. Westbrook lost his vision at age 17 and is the chairman of the Mayor’s Committee for People with Disabilities.

“We’re not all disabled, yet,” he said, inferring that as human beings, sooner or later, we all face circumstances that limit our mobility. And so, he asked, “Why not make Kansas City the most welcoming community in the country?”

Smart, accessible design is a “must-have” for nonprofits so they can serve every single person who may need their services. Both nonprofits and funders need to be educated on smart design because:

- They don’t think about it.
- If they have heard of it, they don’t understand it.
- It is a core value of diversity, inclusiveness and a welcoming organization.

Susie Haake

Indeed, why not make every community welcoming? And why not, in America’s great philanthropic tradition, with funders leading the way?

KC Communities for All Ages and the First Suburbs Coalition have developed the **Making Your Community Work for All Ages – A Toolkit for Cities** (www.kc4aic.org/sites/resources/data/files/2013kccfaa_toolkitforweb.pdf) to help elected officials, planners and community leaders make their cities communities for all ages. (Released July 2013) The toolkit also has a separate **Executive Summary** available (www.kc4aic.org/sites/resources/data/files/2013kccfaa_toolkitexecsummforweb.pdf). Additionally, the **Communities for All Ages Idea Book** (www.kc4aic.org/sites/resources/data/files/communityforallagesideabook.pdf) has been developed to provide homeowners and others with ideas on how to renovate homes and neighborhoods to better meet the needs of current and potential residents who desire to age in place.