

Universal Design: Seeing Hidden Value

by Konrad Kaletsch, 2006

The response to including universal design is most often, too costly. If managed at the beginning of a project, the costs might add only half to one percent. Another response might be, too complicated. These concerns, time and money, seem legitimate reasons to abandon inclusion of universal design. However, they also prevent a wider assessment that would include many undistinguished aspects of universal design. This inquiry looks at an expanded range of the costs and benefits of universal design.

Economic Value

Critical to controlling costs is to apply universal design at the conception of a project and to include trained professionals throughout its application. The cost of a wider doorway is offset by the diminished costs of the wall around it; the cost of installation is the same. Applied as an afterthought, redesign and replacement costs escalate quickly. Applied with forethought, and future adaptations become cost effective. For example, a multistory home could have closets on each floor in the same location; at a later date, they can be easily replaced with an elevator. Economic costs begin to be offset by a growing number of tax incentives and by growing resale values.

Added Value

Universal design adds value to a product and environment. This shows up in retirement communities where builders now recognize the financial benefits of a home that has universal design. It also shows up as others discover and enjoy the easier maneuverability when one has kids, other health issues, or visitors who have difficulty in traditional settings.

Aesthetic Value

In the past, universal design looked like senior citizen or handicap access. Universities now offer training in the many applications of universal design, and, manufacturers are responding to the demands of consumers who seek variety and quality. Through the growing diversity of designs and products, universal design is increasingly transparent. A particular area of growth is adaptability. For example, a cabinet sink is designed such that the cabinet under the sink is removable. Once transformed into a pedestal sink, it now has the usability required by someone using a wheelchair.

Functional Value

When workability ends, the product or environment becomes obsolete. At that time, the item is replaced or the activity outsourced. This corrective cost is greater than the additional expenses incurred at inception. Viewed from an extended perspective of time, it becomes sensible to apply universal design early and satisfy future needs. An always pleasant result shows up for the entire population who benefits and delights from the greater ease now available to them as well.

Emotional Value

When workability ends, the user becomes disempowered. Someone else will do it for them, they replace that which isn't working, or, they relocate. The emotional costs impact both the person whose needs have changed, and the person who now has to help. These transitions might be inevitable, however, their premature arrival, presents an unnecessary burden. Imagine the individual who has to leave their home and community because a change in health renders their home unusable.

Societal Value

Universal design is the experience of an expanding world rather than a diminishing one. The results are independence and joy. A context of discrimination and dependency is replaced by inclusion and opportunity. A person who is mobile has all the opportunities to work, play, shop, socialize, etc. Their participation remains one of valued contribution.

Lost Opportunity Cost

These are the opportunities that would be there but are not due to the absence of universal design. One might lose the opportunity to work, to move about independently, to visit others or to have visitors, to travel, to maintain a cherished lifestyle, or, to enjoy living. These are the opportunities lost simply because the environment isn't adapted to include the widest range of participation possible.

The language and expression of universal design continues to grow. Educational institutions, manufacturers, architects, engineers, designers, those living with a disability, those who don't, and our aging populations, all recognize the benefit of not only a world that is so designed, but the opportunity of one that is done so transparently. What emerges is a broader picture of the cost of universal design, and, what becomes clear is that the cost of universal design is greater in its omission than its inclusion.

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