

ARCHITECTURE

A clarion call for universal design

Need for adaptable, accessible spaces is growing – they're just not sexy yet



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The creation of urban places where people can live very well in retirement and old age is not top-of-mind for most Canadian architects, designers and developers. This fact is curious, given that Canadians are living longer. But in the view of Susan Ruptash, the 52-year-old principal in the Toronto firm Quadrangle Architects Ltd., the problem may be the same kind of social and intellectual sluggishness that the "green" movement in architecture and urban design encountered not so many years ago.

"We still have many people believing this is special-interest design, for only a tiny percentage of the population, and that it's too expensive," Ms. Ruptash told me.

"Where is the Al Gore for universal design? We need adaptable, accessible human-centred design to become sexy, the thing everybody wants, and that is the only hurdle I see in the way. There is a huge network of people around the world who are interested, who are dedicating their careers to this. A lot of them are ready and willing to make this a better world. And so we need to have people want it."

Ms. Ruptash and I talked last week at Christie Gardens, a large residential complex for the elderly in the west side of downtown Toronto.



The Terrace at Christie Gardens, designed by Susan Ruptash of Quadrangle Architects Ltd. 'This is the new urban form of housing for older people.' QUADRANGLE ARCHITECTS LTD.



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Susan Ruptash, principal in Quadrangle Architects Ltd.

Her concrete contribution to the ongoing discussion of late-life housing has taken the form of the 84 thoughtfully designed suites she has added to the top of Christie Gardens.

In the typical apartment I visited, a lot had been done to enhance the dwelling for those with special needs: levers instead of knobs, to make opening doors easier for stiff hands; large windows with low sills, so that those using wheelchairs can catch the views over downtown; plywood surrounds for tubs, so grab bars can be easily installed as the

need arises.

"I'm almost embarrassed to talk about some of these things," Ms. Ruptash said, "because they seem so simple – things like thermostats that are reachable, with the font on them that is easy enough to read. The movement in universal design, looking more at people with visual and hearing disabilities, has made things more friendly for people as they age. The earlier years of barrier-free design were concentrated quite heavily on people in wheelchairs.

"The epitome of the person with disabilities in the early years was a young male with a strong upper body and a full reach, in a wheelchair. But we know people have all kinds of ranges of abilities. Having the focus swing more to people with different types of disabilities has only enriched our thinking about people as they age."

But for Ms. Ruptash and her community of like-minded designers, architecture suitable for the elderly addresses only

one part of the problem of mobility, which is an issue as large as the city itself. Even on that immense scale, however, solutions should be sought in common sense and the common experience of people at every stage of life.

"This isn't rocket science," she said. "We need surfaces that are flat and level and non-slip so that you can walk, roll and shuffle on them. Safe curb-cuts that don't fill up with snow and ice in the winter, safe pedestrian crossings on the roads, good way-finding and signage.

"As Toronto has intensified, we're just starting to come to terms with the volume of pedestrians, scooters and bicycles in the downtown core. Dealing with that for older persons, we're dealing with it for everyone. It's yet another example of an integrated way of thinking about design."

Revising the hardware of downtown – making better sidewalk surfaces, signage and so on – is one way to make city living amenable throughout

'Where is the Al Gore for universal design?'

the cycle of life. Providing downtown housing for the elderly is another. Christie Gardens, for example, strengthens the fabric of urban life by offering people the opportunity to grow old in the same place where they were once young.

"This is the new urban form of housing for older people. Traditionally, these facilities have been suburban, on the fringes of the city," Ms. Rup-tash said.

"What I'm interested in is the first wave of the baby-boomers who are coming along. They have spent their adult lives in the downtown core of Toronto. And we know that people, when they need new forms of housing, want to stay in their own neighbourhoods. So I'm very excited about finding solutions with forms for people in the downtown core."

Her fascination with developing such solutions began with her first project, some 20 years ago, for Quadrangle: a high-rise residence designed to enable people with spinal-cord injuries to live independently.

"It was life-changing for me. I was at the grand opening on the roof terrace, and I had someone come up to me and say, 'I never thought I would be able to live independently in my own apartment, and I'm so happy that I can do that now.'

"I realized I had the power to change and improve people's lives."
