

Design of private seniors' residence disrespects wheelchair users

Jody Negley's Story

When you are disabled and growing older, everyday tasks become that much harder. You begin to question whether remaining in your home is realistic, especially in the context of a homecare system that is sorely lacking.

I decided to check out a seniors' residence that opened just recently. It was one of those private, high-end places for independent seniors. They had over three hundred apartments ranging from studios to three-bedroom apartments, starting at over \$3,000 per month. Meal plans were extra. They offered another twenty-five Signature care units, mostly studios, for those seniors needing a little extra care from a nurse or personal care attendant. Prices there started at \$5,500 per month; all meals were included.

I'll admit here that I did not fit the profile of their typical clientele: First, the idea of spending even \$3,000 a month on rent is hard to wrap my brain around. Second, I am disabled; I use an electric wheelchair to get around. I would quickly come to realize that in the eyes of the residence representative, the wheelchair meant that I was not autonomous and therefore not eligible for one of the three hundred apartments for independent seniors. Third, I am far more knowledgeable than the average consumer about the features and benefits of universal design. I would quickly come to realize that the developers and architects involved in the construction of the residence made some deliberate choices in terms of the design and layout of the units.

FYI, a quick summary of universal design: It is possible for an apartment to be designed and built in such a way that anyone, regardless of age or ability, can live there over the course of their lifetime (knowing that they need not move into a seniors' residence when they get too old) because their apartment was designed to adapt to their changing needs over time. This means that the same apartment will safely accommodate a family with young children, an adult who may or may not have a physical disability, and/or a senior who may or may not have limited mobility. Universal design works for everyone. It is easily adaptable if needed.

In the context of an ever-increasing aging population; in the context of statistics that cite the high morbidity and mortality rates among the elderly caused by falls; in the context of strained (dare I say broken) healthcare and homecare systems that are failing to meet current needs, the use of universal design practices in any new residential construction project would seem like an obvious choice ... Yet it is not standard practice; far from it.

During my tour of the building's units, I quickly noted that not only did the showers not have grab bars, but that there was a two inch lip and a glass door at the entrance, making it impossible for a wheelchair user to have access to the shower. I asked to visit an accessible unit (which I had already done when booking the visit) and would come to learn that not a single one of the over three hundred-plus apartments was accessible. Not one.

It was mind-boggling to me that the architects and developers of this project, dedicated to the needs of a senior population, could be so blind to the need for such basic safety features as a grab

bar in, and an accessible entry to, the shower. It became increasingly obvious to me as I spoke with the residence representative that they not only had a very arbitrary notion of the concept of autonomy, but a very poor understanding of barrier-free design and its benefits.

It seems that the developers and perhaps the majority of clientele of this kind of private residence have an image or profile in mind of the type of tenant who will occupy that space. Disabled seniors and most certainly wheelchair users do not fit the profile. How extraordinarily convenient therefore, that the design features of the bathrooms in these residences make it impossible for such seniors to move in.

While the twenty-five or so Signature care units for less autonomous seniors did have roll-in showers, they came with their own share of design flaws, for example, the shower controls were on the opposite wall to the seat, thus requiring the senior to lean too far forward; the shower lining was surprisingly flimsy, making it unlikely to hold up under the weight of an electric wheelchair. This meant that the senior would be fully dependant on an attendant to assist in showering. Of course, such services were conveniently available at an additional cost to what was already a prohibitively expensive monthly rent. A rent that was at least double the cost of the units designated for autonomous seniors.

I knew going in that I did not fit the profile of their typical client based on my income and assets along with the fact that I am an electric wheelchair user. I was not prepared, however, to see how blatantly unwelcome I would feel by virtue of the very design of the space. Suffice to say that I will not be moving there, or any other private residence for that matter. It turns out that private seniors' residences are exempt from any Quebec accessibility construction code requirements.

An agent who helps seniors search within the existing private network to find a residence that meets their needs confirmed that she knew of no private residence that had apartments with roll-in showers ... In other words, no private residence can accommodate a wheelchair user who is autonomous. Equally disturbing is the fact that, like the residence I visited, the residence management have a strict policy of refusing to allow tenants to adapt the shower in order to make it accessible to them ... in spite of the fact that government subsidies are available to finance these modifications.

I certainly plan to follow up on this issue with the Quebec Human Rights Commission to see what they have to say. To be continued ...