

Calling for Change; Embracing Universal Design Salvatore Amenta, December 2024

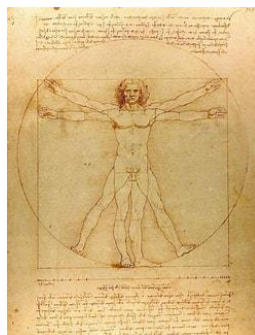
Change is challenging at any age. In my early twenties I couldn't get enough of it and tore the face out of my watch to expose its inner workings. What time it was mattered less to me than what lay ahead. I foolishly believed that any change would be better than the status quo.

Now 79, the future's no longer where it's at for me. Life has taught me that change is grand only if it's for the better. Anyway, unlike my old watch, **my** inner workings aren't faring any better than my outer shell these days. I can no longer jump into the bathtub, climb the stairs, hop in and out of the car, and find my keys let alone my watch. In fact, I'm no longer at home in the house I own!

My wife recently joked she'd drop me off at a nursing home. I didn't laugh. "I want to age and die at home – in my community, with my remaining friends," I said, "being locked up in an institution with strangers is not for me!"

As you can see, time and disability look very different to me today. Dad warned me not to get old, but did I listen? Maybe it's just as well since I'd have died younger and so wouldn't be here to call for change.

Truth is, I could see dad aging, and young people becoming paralyzed from skiing and car accidents – but that was **them, not me!** Like most of us, I lived in a fantasy world of able-bodied people.



When I look in the mirror, I don't see Leonardo's Ideal Man, and all around me I see disability. We arrive helpless, some of us born physically or intellectually needy, and leave more or less dependent on others. In between, we're lucky to avoid debilitating accidents and illnesses. I now embrace change only if it accommodates real people with disabilities and hospitals which are fit for our aging population. For such a society, we need a supply of accessible housing so that all of us have a safe, secure and livable place to call home, as promised by our National Housing Strategy.

To repeat, most seniors like me dread going to the nursing homes we consider a fate worse than death. Nevertheless, even though we can't stay where we are, many of us can't afford fancy retirement homes or costly renovations. We just need a place to live and die with dignity after a lifetime of building the world we leave behind, both good and bad.

Are we asking for too much?

Evidently, the Ontario government thinks so. It considers us "bed-blockers", and tries to herd us into long-term care homes to end hallway medicine and shorten wait-lists. Has it done either?

So I dare to ask, instead of forcing seniors to choose between institutionalization and costly renovation, why aren't we being offered the option of aging in place with home care, and with accessible housing that lets us stay in our communities? It would save billions in hospitalization costs!

To be fair, our premier can't give us this option because accessible housing is almost nowhere to be found in Ontario. Furthermore, our housing industry just keeps building homes for the able-bodied. To provide accessible housing, it would have to change **HOW** it builds homes, and for that to happen we need a fundamental change in how we think about housing and how to build it.

That change requires Universal Design to be incorporated in our building codes. By definition, ***UD creates environments that can be accessed and used by all people, regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.*** Recently, Toronto's City Council acted on a report which recommended this approach for all of its new, city-owned housing.

As the report stresses, building inclusive environments "is not a special requirement for the benefit of only a minority of the population." It affirms that Universal Design is "a fundamental condition of [good design](#). It goes on to describe it as "a person-centred, affordable, adaptable, and inclusive approach to home design that seeks to address housing inequalities." In sum, UD aims to provide housing for all, not just for the able-bodied.

The good news is that our Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation says it costs no more to build UD apartments and condos, and only a percentage or so more for detached homes – if builders do so from the start, in the blueprints.

The bad news is that the building industry isn't listening. Actually, it's ***resisting*** even though 27% of Canadians have a disability! Worse, it's doing this despite

the fact that, according to Statistics Canada, 75% of homeowners are seniors like me with homes worth an average of \$750,000!

Basic math tells us that if only a third of Canada's nine million boomers own their homes, they have trillions of dollars in equity at their disposal! Why is the housing industry ignoring this huge market? Like Premier Ford, perhaps it thinks that providing accessible housing for people with disabilities and seniors is asking for too much.

If so, they need to be told that systemically depriving Canadians of accessible housing discriminates against them and violates rights legislation which supersedes all other laws and building codes. So it is not only outrageous to discriminate against persons with disabilities and elderly Canadians, but also unconscionable to tolerate this when they have given so much to Canada.

Surely honouring these rights demands the provision of accessible housing desperately needed by persons with disabilities and seniors. That's why I'm calling for the fundamental change needed to embrace and mandate Universal Design for all new housing through the National Building Code. Canada urgently needs a sustainable stock of accessible housing for people with disabilities, young and old – for all Canadians and for seven generations!

We don't need a bloody revolution – just a basic change in how we think about and build our homes, starting today. It is the only way that Universal Design will ever be as standard as flush toilets!

I leave you with this. In 2005 Ontario promised to make public spaces fully accessible by 2025. Isn't it time we paid attention to making fully accessible the private spaces where we spend the other half of our lives – our homes? We need fundamental change, and embracing Universal Design is the key to social justice – not only for people with disabilities and seniors, but for ALL Canadians!

Brief Bio of Salvatore (Sal) Amenta, PhD, MA, BA, AOCA

A retired art educator and musician, Sal enjoys cruising and ballroom dancing. He led one of the largest teachers' associations in Canada, and was a college dean before retiring in 2002. While retired, he served on Community Living boards, co-founded Seniors for Social Action Ontario (SSAO) during the pandemic, and co-chairs the Accessible Housing Network (AHN) of over 70 Canadian organizations.