

DEL WILLIAMS

around the HOUSE

Aesthetics Meets ADA Compliance

For builders and architects, meeting the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) access requirements can be a challenge, not because of a lack of available products but because a limited design selection in those products can conflict with carefully orchestrated aesthetics. The challenge can be even more daunting with historic properties, where a sense of time and place passed down for generations can be disrupted by a disjointed design element such as a modern fixture.

As an architect, design specifier, and wheelchair user, Harold Kiewel has a professional and personal interest in seeking better solutions for meeting

ADA access requirements while preserving aesthetics and project schedules.

“For the past 30 years, most accessible design has been an afterthought, and it shows,” says Kiewel, AIA, CSI, CCS. He is an architect and specifications writer for HMC Architects in San Diego. “Tighter design-build deadlines and just-in-time delivery schedules have heightened the tendency to settle for an unconsidered, disjointed design. The result is a patchwork ‘tacked on’ feel that results from trying to meet ADA regs after the basic design is worked out. It doesn’t have to be this way.”

To comply with ADA requirements, for instance, the historic Minnesota state capitol building had to be renovated before the legislature returned from recess. Automatic operators were installed on

doors and actuator switches mounted on walls. Because the stone and marble walls couldn’t be cut into, the actuator switches couldn’t be recessed flush with the walls, as typically done for aesthetic reasons.

“The building was historically ornate, so placing stainless-steel switch boxes on the walls would’ve looked tacky, like an ugly add-on,” says Eric Magdal, owner of Straughan Hardware, the commercial hardware distributor contracted to supply the switches.

To avoid an aesthetic mismatch, the project architect specified a special finish and a custom-made escutcheon (an architectural item of door furniture that surrounds a keyhole or lock cylinder) that wrapped around the switch box to blend it with the wall. Because the project schedule was tight, Magdal

Determination Pays Off

Following a bout with polio as a child, Harold Kiewel and his family moved from South Dakota to Minneapolis to be near the Shriner’s Children’s Hospital. He received treatment and learned to walk using leg crutches and braces. Kiewel’s father was a farmer and carpenter, and Harold worked with him on the farm and was active in 4-H. An early influence on Kiewel’s career choice was seeing the blueprints for construction projects on which his father worked.

After graduating sixth out of 100 students in his high-school class, Kiewel studied architecture at the University of Minnesota. During his sophomore year, however, a design studio professor suggested Kiewel change his major. He said if Kiewel did that, he’d do okay, but he’d flunk out if he stayed with architecture. Kiewel believes the incident reflected the professor’s strong negative feelings about disability in general and had little to do with him or his design skills. Unfortunately, Kiewel dropped architecture and explored several other majors before settling on one just for the purpose of graduating.

Immediately after graduation, Kiewel went to work in retail but felt unfulfilled. He thought about his drawing board and knew that’s where he belonged. Because Vocational Rehab wouldn’t fund a graduate degree, Kiewel enrolled at the Minnesota Drafting School to get the skills he needed for an entry-level architectural position.

Kiewel’s first job in his career of choice was with the City of Minneapolis in 1975 as an access consultant. He helped educate building owners about the state’s new accessibility code. From there he moved to the State Council on Disabilities. Out of this work came the book *Accessible Architecture*, which Kiewel co-wrote with John Salmen.

Still determined to be an architect, Kiewel returned to the University of Minnesota and earned his bachelor of Environmental Design. In 1982, he left his state job to pursue a master’s of architecture.

In 1986, Kiewel’s first job as an intern architect was with Toltz King Duvall Anderson (TKDA). He worked up to staff architect, where he helped prepare construction documents and specifications. During his early job assignments and training at TKDA, there was a reluctance to let Kiewel visit job sites. When he asked about seeing more in the field, one manager told him construction drawings would teach him all he needed to know.



Architect and wheelchair user Harold Kiewel has a professional and personal interest in seeking out better solutions for meeting ADA requirements while preserving aesthetics.

knew he had to get the custom work done right the first time.

“Automatic door operator switches are usually the last fixtures to be installed before a reopening,” says Magdal. “And custom work typically has an eight-week or more lead time. There was no room for error.”

Help Is on the Way

Magdal turned to Wikk Industries, Inc., a Greendale, Wis.-based designer and manufacturer of automatic door activation solutions. Wikk supplied 35 heavy-duty bronze door actuator switches with custom escutcheon plates to architectural specification. The company fulfilled the custom order, cutting the lead time in half.

“You could’ve walked through the building and thought the high-tech hardware was originally installed with the building,” says Magdal. “It was a seamless match that helped preserve the historic sense of place and community.”

Seeing the Big Picture

Maintaining aesthetic balance and ADA compliance ultimately requires keeping

an eye on the big picture and understanding the practical challenges of important details, such as how people with different levels of mobility open doors.

“When you look at the diversity of people using automatic door openers, you realize that one size *doesn't* fit all,” explains Kiewel. “The standard 4-inch round or square switch plate placed at a certain height doesn’t work equally well for people with limited mobility, hand dexterity, or other limitations. It can cause some to lean or others to strain or uncomfortably unbalance themselves to gain door access.”

Devices such as Wikk’s switches and other accessibility products allow design professionals to creatively meet ADA code while offering aesthetic integration. The end result is a functional, welcoming design that leaves no one out.

(PN and PVA do not endorse products and services.)

Contact: Wikk Industries, Inc., P.O. Box 167, Greendale, WI 53129 / 877-421-9490 / 421-3158 (fax) / www.wikk.com. ■

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