Accessibility: Existing Buildings

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(August, 2012)

Course Description

AIA Learning Units: 1.0 hour (HSW)

This 60-minute video course provides a general overview of the various codes and standards that affect existing buildings; including the California Building Code (CBC) and the International Building Code (IBC along with the ICC A117.1) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (2010 ADA). Scoping for alterations and additions are covered and common errors are highlighted.

This course complies with California licensure requirements regarding accessibility and provides essential information about accessibility requirements applicable in most states.

This course was filmed in 2012 and reflects codes and standards in effect when the course was produced. As codes, standards and interpretations are subject to change, viewers should check current codes and standards with regards to accessibility. These include the California Building Code (CBC), the International Building Code (IBC along with the ICC A117.1) and the 2010 Americans with Disabilities Standards (2010 ADA). Viewers should also discuss specific circumstances with building code officials and with regulatory and other agencies that have jurisdiction over their specific projects.

About The Presenter

Karen is the principal and founder of Karen Braitmayer, FAIA, Ltd., an architectural consulting practice that focuses on accessibility and accessible design. As a registered architect she advises state agencies, local governments, institutions, school districts, design professionals, builders and owners on accessibility under applicable laws including the ADA and the Fair Housing Act. Over the past 18 years, Karen’s consulting work has ranged from housing and commercial mixed-use to institutional and educational projects. Karen served as a member of the Washington State Building Code Council from 1994 to 2001 and continues to advise on the development of Washington State’s accessibility code. Currently, she serves as a Presidential appointee on the United States Access Board.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify the applicable accessibility codes and regulations that cover existing buildings
2. Describe barrier removal under the American with Disabilities Act
4. Understand items required of accessible alterations to historic structures

Note to Transcript Readers:

This transcript is a verbatim reflection of the video narrative and is provided so that those with hearing impairments can follow the video course. As with many verbal presentations, verbatim translations do not always result in the same type of concise language as if the transcript was developed and presented as a technical document.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

I'm Karen Braitmayer. The topic is Accessibility: Existing Buildings. This is what you need to know.

My home town Seattle is a midsize city of around 600,000 residents. Our Department of Planning and Development approves 5,000 building permits annually. Eighty-eight percent of those are additions or alterations to existing buildings. This means that we have a greater opportunity to increase accessibility in our communities by increasing accessibility for existing buildings. The philosophy around the codes and standards are that all buildings should be accessible. Now, the fact is that there's low to no accessibility in most existing buildings. The ADA requires an ongoing obligation to remove barriers. Building codes say each time you renovate or add to a building, that's your chance to increase access, not much different than if you were increasing a structural capacity or fire safety approach. The regulations we're going to talk about today include the 2010 ADA Standards, which is a federal standard, The California Building Code, and the International Building Code, which is used in many states other than California.

CHAPTER TWO: AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)

So under the ADA they have a somewhat unusual approach, which is this obligation to continue to remove barriers when it is readily achievable to do so for all public accommodations. Public accommodation is any kind of facility that invites the public in, everything from your daycare center and your movie theater, your doctor's office and the shopping mall. Readily achievable is easily accomplishable without much effort or expense.

And who's responsible to do this? Well, the owner, the tenant or the management company, anyone who owns, leases, leases to or operates a place of public accommodation. The ADA expects you to do simple fixes, things like changing out your doorknobs for lever handles or lowering the paper towel dispenser in your toilet room, maybe adding a visual alarm component or adding a curb ramp if you don't have one or maybe restriping your parking lot so that you'll have an accessible parking space with an access aisle.

In barrier removal some of the things that I see in my practice are often simple things like on the inside of the toilet stall door, having a loop handle can make it so much easier for people who use mobility devices to pull the door closed behind them. And then having a large paddle on the latch requires less pinching and gripping in order to operate. So that could be a very simple fix.

Under this barrier removal philosophy, the goal is equal access for people with disabilities to goods and services that are available to the general public. It does not mean that you have to meet the new construction standards of the ADA. You might be looking at a condition such as this one, which is somebody placing very large trash cans under the hall call button for the elevator, thus making it very difficult for someone to approach and use that button. By relocating the trash cans, you might remove a barrier.

And then figuring out what's readily achievable varies per facility and owner. So you want to look at the nature and the cost of the change. Do you have to add a ramp? That might cost more than changing out your door handles. Looking at the overall financial resources of the individual site, how many employees work there and what kinds of safety issues you have. You also want to look at how far away the site is maybe from the parent corporation. A mom and pop store is held to a slightly different standard than one of a very large national chain. And then looking at the overall financial resources of any parent corporation.

Another item in barrier removal that might be super simple is if you have an existing accessory in your toilet room like this example of a paper towel dispenser that is too high and the controls are out of reach was very simple to just add a second dispenser that's within the reach range. So sometimes you don't even have to remove what's there. Maybe it's just easy enough to add a second one.

In this case, the owner of this facility added a new railing or barrier underneath an escalator. If the railing was not there, someone with vision impairment or who's blind might have bumped their head on the underside of this stair. By adding this railing, the owner removed a barrier, again a somewhat simple add.
So typical questions around this barrier removal idea are: Is an elevator always required in barrier removal? And the answer to that would be no. Is a portable ramp allowed? Rarely. Portable ramps are rarely secure and stable enough to be used. So it's hardly, hardly recommended that any ramps be permanently installed. Do I need to remove barriers in employee-only work areas? And that would only be for an accommodation for a specific employee and required underneath a different section of the ADA.

So if you have a building that has a variety of barriers, how do you figure out which ones to do first? Well, the ADA provides priorities for barrier removal. The first is getting in the door. Being able to get into the facility would be your first step. So making sure that the door is accessible or the pathway getting to the front door is accessible would be your first step. Your second is providing access to the primary goods and services. So remember this is for public accommodations, places that invite the public in. And you want to be able to be sure that people with disabilities have access in the same way to whatever fun thing is happening in the building. The third priority is providing access to the restrooms, and the fourth is providing access to anything else: drinking fountains, telephones, that sort of thing.

It is recommended that you have what's called an implementation plan. That would mean you would assess your facility to determine if you have barriers and what those non-compliant conditions are. And then once you have a list, then you develop a plan for removing them, kind of figure out how to start chipping away at those barriers over time. And how fast you remove them and how many, of course, depends on what is readily achievable for you as a building owner.

When you do assessment, it's helpful to take a lot of notes and records. You can see here when we do assessments at our company, we take a lot of photographs and we keep track of the individual cases and the individual spaces. And that way you can get an overall plan on how to remove those barriers.

Do keep in mind that the ADA has been around for—we're almost up to its 22nd year. It was passed in 1991 and revised again in 2010. The owner's obligation to remove barriers is really overdue, and as the time goes by, your exposure gets higher. So it's really recommended that you do as much as you can as quickly as you can.

If you're planning alterations and additions under the ADA, please know that any changes that affect usability must meet the new construction requirements. So we've been talking about barrier removal and how that isn't expected to go as far as the new construction requirements. Well, when you do an alteration or addition, there is an expectation that you go that far. Now, the standards for alterations are not quite the same but they are closer than in barrier removal. So you still need to be able to enter. You have to get to the goods and services. You need to be able to use the toilet and then consider other features.

Under the ADA, alterations to an area of primary function trigger path of travel upgrades. Now, an area of primary function is basically the same as your area where you have your primary goods and services. You're also required to look at the path that takes you from the building entrance to this altered area and be sure that it complies. If it doesn't, you're required to make necessary upgrades. There's a cap on the cost of this additional work for the path of travel upgrades to 20% of the cost of the project. The ADA is enforced by the Department of Justice, not by your local building official. So please keep in mind that your local building official is not going to inspect for your compliance with this particular requirement.

So some of the triggers for this kind of work are if you renovate usable space, then you need to bring it up to compliance, if you renovate structural parts, then you need to bring it up to compliance, or if you change walls or full height partitions. Now, if you're just doing reroofing or wallpapering, interior painting and changes to mechanical and electrical systems, unless any of those things affect usability, that is not a trigger as an alteration.

Now there are some exceptions to this requirement, first that the standards for alterations are a little less than the new construction requirements. So, for example, if in your alteration you find that you have load bearing members that cannot be altered or you have site constraints, then you're allowed to make things accessible to the maximum extent feasible.

Now, what is an area of primary function? It would be something like the office in a business, the waiting or exam room in a doctor's office, the theater in a movie theater, or the store entrance at a mall. It is not things like hallways, restrooms, or mechanical spaces. Any alteration to an area of primary function must comply. And then, as we were saying, the path of travel to the area of primary function also must comply.
The definition of the path of travel is the route to the area of primary function plus the amenities on that same route. Now, as I said before, the cost of any alterations to the path of travel are capped at 20% of the overall alteration. However, along that route, you’re required to consider things like if you have an accessible entrance, if you have a no-step path to the area of primary function, what the restrooms are like on the way, and some other things. Now, changes to windows or hardware, controls, outlets, signage, all those kinds of changes to the area of primary function do not trigger path of travel changes. Any kind of barrier removal that is done especially for accessibility does not trigger path of travel changes.

This next slide shows you a very common barrier that we see across the country and that is the placement of very large toilet paper dispensers over the grab bar in toilet stalls. Relocating this dispenser below the grab bar will make the grab bar more usable for someone who needs it to transfer.

And this next image shows signage placed at a good height but unfortunately on the wrong side of the door. You can see that it's located next to the hinge side of the door, and it should be next to the latch side. Again, relocating the signage is a common and easy barrier removal technique.

CHAPTER THREE: CALIFORNIA BUILDING CODE (CBC)

Under the California Building Code, the goal is to increase accessibility as feasible, very much the same as under the ADA. California Building Code addresses alterations, structural repairs and any additions to existing buildings and requires them to comply with their accessibility requirements.

One feature that is slightly different in the California Building Code than under the ADA is the topic of disproportionality. Where the total cost of the work of the project is less than an annual valuation, and for some years it's been around $128,000 or so, you have an obligation only to do the work that you've proposed. So greater than $128K, you are required to provide barrier removal for various features associated with accessibility. So you have to provide accessible features for maybe the entrance, the route through the building, restrooms, drinking fountain, and telephone. There is a cap on this requirement as well of 20%. So if the cost of your work of the accessibility improvements exceeds 20% of the cost of the work without those features, you only have to do up to 20%.

Just like the ADA, the California Building Code has priorities for how to remove those barriers. So once you've assessed your existing building and determined where those non-compliant conditions are, you would start chipping away at them in this order.

- Priority one is to have an accessible entrance
- Priority two, an accessible route to your altered area.
- Priority three is at least one accessible restroom for each sex.
- Priority four is accessible telephones
- Priority five, an accessible drinking fountain.
- Priority six are other things such as parking, storage and signage.

This is really a great opportunity to think about the philosophy of barrier removal or improvements for accessibility to existing buildings throughout all of the codes we're going to talk about today. They always start with getting into the building, being able to get to the area that's altered or the area of primary function and then the associated facilities.

Under the California Building Code, you do have an obligation to make upgrades. So you can't get away with doing a lot of small projects over a period of time instead of one large project in order to sort of slide under that valuation. If an area has been altered within the last two years without upgrades, the total cost of all those upgrades will be used to determine what's disproportionate. So the goal is to get you to put all your projects together and really make a good effort to make that project accessible.
Now, recently the California Building Code has been upgraded to align with the 2010 ADA, making it definitely a lot easier for architects that are practicing in California. They are requiring that alterations to buildings that were previously built without elevators on levels above and below the ground floor are subject to the disproportionality rule even for these small projects. In the past, facilities such as these I'm going to list have not been required to fall under the disproportionality rule and now they do, so offices and service stations of 3 stories or more and 3,000 square feet or more, the offices of physicians or surgeons, shopping centers, and other buildings of 3 stories or more or 3,000 square feet or more per floor if a reasonable portion of the services are on the accessible level.

Also in alignment with the ADA, they require that levels above and below the accessible level in non-elevator buildings must comply fully. I know that sounds like it maybe doesn't make a lot of sense. Why would you need to have an accessible restroom on a level that doesn't have an elevator on it? And that's largely because there are many people who benefit from the features in, for example, an accessible restroom who may still be able to climb the stairs. Someone with arthritis would benefit from having lever handles on the door, loop handles on both sides of the toilet stall door, etc. etc. Individuals of short stature benefit from the lowered accessories. So that's the philosophy behind providing accessibility on a level even if the elevator isn't there.

Under the California Building Code, there are exceptions to the requirement to remove barriers to the path of travel. So alterations to specifically meet accessibility in things like entrances, toilet facilities, elevators, stairs, putting in proper handrails, parking restriping or resurfacing, those things do not trigger the path of travel. Barrier removal under the ADA does not trigger. And projects that are like maintenance related, heating, ventilation, air conditioning, reroofing, electrical, cosmetic work, non-architectural work, etc.

However, if you alter switches and outlets, do recall that those need to be compliant. And if you are altering your toilet rooms and it's technically infeasible to get a toilet room altered for each sex, it is allowable to do a unisex toilet per floor being altered. That is a good substitution.

One of the most common errors I see around roll-in showers frequently in hotel rooms is the placement of the shower seat or sometimes no shower seat. In this case, we're looking at an image of a hotel shower that does have a shower seat, great, bolted to the wall and does have an adjustable showerhead. Unfortunately, the seat is mounted to the back wall and it needs to be mounted to one of the side walls and have the showerhead located next to it within reach. The reason for this is you need to be able to pull your wheelchair up next to the shower seat and transfer on. Therefore, the shower seat, one of the edges needs to be close to the leading edge of the open side of the shower. And you need to have the shower head and controls within reach so that you don't slip off the seat trying to reach it. That would be an unsafe condition.

Here's another common error that I see in roll-in showers. On the right, we're looking at an image from the California Code that shows an alternate roll-in shower. This shower has a wing wall that supports a shower seat and the shower head next to it. The image on the left is a sample shower that an architect provided to me asking whether or not it was equal, fully compliant. And if you can see, the seat in the image on the left is located against the back wall and in the code requirement, it's located against the front wing wall next to the open space. This is really a critical difference in functionality for the shower. And so when you look at your projects and compare them to the codes images, pay attention to details like this so that you end up with not only a roll-in shower but a usable roll-in shower.

Diagrams from Chapter Three
CHAPTER FOUR: INTERNATIONAL BUILDING CODE (IBC)

Moving on now to the International Building Code, their philosophy on existing buildings is very similar to the first two that we've been talking about. Again, we're going to increase our accessibility as feasible. Any time that you do an alteration or an addition to an existing building, you must provide accessible features. And your alterations and additions are not required to be more accessible than new construction, but they are not allowed to reduce existing accessibility. And that's kind of an unusual statement but one that I think really drives accessibility and barrier removal under the IBC.

So the International Building Code looks at change of occupancy as a trigger for accessibility. Now that may mean that if you buy or lease a space that was one occupancy and you're going to use it in very much the same shape without a lot of alterations as a different occupancy, it triggers upgrades to accessibility. And the features that need to be upgraded include pretty much the same list we've seen under the ADA and the California Building Code. You have to have an accessible entrance. You have to have an accessible route from that entrance to the area of primary function, signage, parking. If you have a load zone, you must provide an accessible load zone. And you need to have an accessible route from that load zone or from your accessible parking to the building.

A change of occupancy for just a part of the building means alterations to that portion must comply with the alterations section. If it is technically infeasible—remember that means like you have a structural member that you can't move or a site constraint—to comply with the new construction standards, then the work must comply to the maximum extent feasible. And remember that the International Building Code, like the California Building Code, those are enforced by your local building officials. So you do have someone who helps and provides oversight on this issue, unlike the ADA.

Additions, under the IBC, must comply with all the new construction standards. There's really no difference. If the addition affects accessibility to an area of primary function, then that area must comply with the requirements of alterations to the area of primary function. So imagine that if you add a space that is not an area of primary function but somehow influences the path getting to it, then you must provide a level of accessibility that's equal with the requirements of alterations to the area of primary function.

We're now looking at an image of another common barrier that we see, and that is drinking fountains that are in a route of travel without any barriers or protection. In this case, we have a lower drinking fountain that is just above the 27-inch detectable height and a higher drinking fountain that certainly is. This would be a protruding object. If you have situations like this, certainly you want to assess, figure out what the difference is and what kinds of barriers you have. And then this is really the best example, which is recessing your drinking fountains in a niche so that they're no longer protrusions into the path of travel.

Alterations, under the IBC, to a building or a portion of a building must comply with the new construction standards. So just like any new construction, if you're going to alter a space, you need to be sure that it complies. There are three exceptions. That altered element or space is not required to be on an accessible route unless it is affecting an area of primary function. So if you alter an office in the back of a space, in the back of an office suite, it's possible that you do not need to alter the accessible route if that office is not an area of primary function. An accessible means of egress is not required to existing buildings or facilities. And Type A individually owned dwelling units may be reduced to a Type B dwelling unit level. Other than that, all alterations must comply with new construction standards. Again, if it's technically infeasible to comply with the new construction standards, remember the words you must comply to the maximum extent feasible.

And again, for an alteration affecting an area of primary function, you must have an accessible route to that area of primary function. The route will apply to toilet rooms or drinking fountains that serve the area of primary function. Just like under the ADA and under the California Code, if you're altering an area of primary function and you're required to put some money in to increase accessibility along the route getting to area of primary function, there are various things that need to be upgraded. And that might include toilet room upgrades, entrance door upgrades, maybe even parking lot upgrades, whatever it takes in order to create an accessible route to the area of primary function. Now, there are some exceptions. The same exception of the 20% cap applies under the IBC as it did under the California Code. And an alteration to things like hardware, windows, controls, those do not trigger upgrades to the path of travel. And if you have mechanical or maintenance-related changes like mechanical space, electrical, asbestos removal, those do not trigger. And it does not apply to upgrades solely for increasing accessibility to existing buildings or facilities. Again, very much like the California Code.

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So here's some of the scoping issues under the International Building Code for alterations. So, if you're altering an entrance, it must be accessible unless there's already an existing accessible entrance. If you alter an elevator, it must comply with the new construction standards. And any elevators that respond to the same hall call button must also be altered. So pretty much that means that any elevators in a group in a building with more than one elevator must be altered together.

Platform lifts are allowed under the IBC to be part of an accessible route in alterations, and they must comply with the new construction standards. So you know that in new construction, there are limited areas that platform lifts are allowed to be used. In alterations, it's a little bit more lenient. In additions, alterations or a change of occupancy when you add a new stair or escalator, you must provide a new accessible means of vertical circulation to the same floors.

Now that doesn't mean it's necessarily an elevator. I guess it could be a ramp. But do remember that in new construction, you are required to make the accessible circulation path equal to the general circulation path. So if the general circulation path is interior, the accessible route must be interior as well.

So continuing on with some of the scoping issues under the IBC, ramps for very short rises are allowed to exceed the maximum 1:12 slope of new construction, but these are very short rises like 3 or 6 inches. And where it's technically infeasible to alter a performance area to be on a fully accessible route, at least one of each type needs to be accessible. Under new construction, you know that there is a requirement that if there is a route from the audience to the stage, you're required to have an accessible route from the audience to the stage. And in this case, if it's technically infeasible to achieve that, at least one of each type needs to be accessible.

Now let's talk a little bit about buildings that have sleeping or dwelling units in them. Just for a point of information, the IBC sees three levels of accessibility in sleeping and dwelling units. Accessible units are typically found in transient housing like hotels, motels, or hospitals, nursing homes, that sort of thing. Type A and Type B dwelling units are found in apartments, condos, other longer-term facilities. So thinking about that, where sleeping and dwelling units in buildings required to have accessible units are being altered, the requirements for accessible units is calculated on the number of units altered or added. So you don't have to calculate the number of accessible units based on everything in the building, just on the new units that are being added. Where more than 20 Group R-2 units—these are basically apartments or condominiums—in buildings are being added, the number of Type A units is calculated on the number of units added, very much like the accessible unit criteria. And where more than 4 Group R-2 sleeping or dwelling units are added, the number of Type B units is calculated on the number of units added. So the good news is you don't have to increase the number of your accessible Type A or Type B units by the entire building, just what's been added.

And then looking at court rooms, the new construction requirements for court rooms require accessible routes to all sorts of features like the jury box, the witness stand, and the judge's bench. In alterations, wheelchair accessible spaces are not required to be inside the jury box or the witness stand if the addition of a ramp or a lift to the existing court room would block a means of egress.

And if it is technically infeasible to alter existing toilet and bathing facilities to be accessible—it's probably one of the number one things that gets altered in a building—an accessible family or assisted use toilet or bathing room is permitted. And the term family or assisted use toilet is pretty much the same as a unisex toilet. It needs to be located on the same floor and in the same area as the non-accessible facility, and there needs to be signage mounted at the non-accessible toilet room to indicate the location of the new accessible feature.

Where it's technically infeasible to provide accessible dressing, fitting or locker rooms in the same area as a non-accessible dressing, fitting or locker room, it's okay to provide one room on the same level, one accessible room on the same level. And where separate sex facilities for dressing, fitting and locker rooms are provided, you need to have accessible facilities for each sex provided. And separate-sex rooms are not required where only unisex rooms are provided. In my Y, for example, all of the dressing rooms for the pool are individual family toilet and changing rooms. And so in that case, if we'd had only individual, small rooms and they were not accessible, all you would have to do is add one unisex room.
The IBC also covers fuel dispensers like at gas stations. And since the requirement for reach range has lowered in the last iteration between the 1991 ADA and the 2010, the International Building Code allows the operable parts for replacement units for fuel dispensers or fuel pumps to be allowed to be 54 inches measured from the surface of the vehicular way. So you can't be any higher than the 1991 ADA height, but you don't have to bring it down to the 48 inches if it's a replacement fixture. And door thresholds will be a maximum of 1/4 inch at doorways and will have beveled edges on both sides.

CHAPTER FIVE: QUALIFIED HISTORIC BUILDINGS AND FACILITIES

When we talk about existing buildings, I get frequent questions around alterations to historic structures. How do you do that and meet the accessibility requirements? Are historic structures exempt completely; we don't need to do anything?

I wanted to show you these two images, sort of a before and after of this lovely church. The alteration on the right, you can see there was an existing set of stairs and somebody added a wooden ramp laid over the stairs, which is clearly steep and definitely stigmatizing—don't you think—to go up. And on the left is the image of the sort or redo of the whole front yard of the church where they gently sloped a new pathway up to a level entrance to the door. Everybody enters the same way. It's tasteful and it works beautifully in relationship to the architecture.

So let's look at what the three codes talk about for historic buildings. Under the ADA, a qualified historic building must be listed under or eligible to be listed by the National Historic Register, or it must be designated as historic under a state or local law. So even though the building might have beautiful or redeeming features, architectural features, if it doesn't meet these criteria, it is not a qualified historic building.

Alterations to qualified historic buildings under the ADA must comply with the same standards as other alterations unless compliance threatens the historic significance of the building. And the State Historic Preservation Officer must agree that that compliance would threaten the historic significance. Only then can you do alternant requirements.

So some of the alternate requirements that you could take advantage of if you have one of these qualified buildings is that at least one accessible route from the site access point to the accessible entrance must be provided. At least one accessible public entrance must be provided. Now, if you can't do an entrance that's used by the public, you may be able to use an unlocked non-public entrance. You must provide directional signage to that entrance and a notification device that allows the public to ask for entrance or let them know that they want to come in.

If toilets are provided in your qualified building, at least one unisex toilet room shall be provided along an accessible route. And you need an accessible route from the accessible entrance to all publicly usable space on at least the level of the accessible entrance, so the main floor of the building or the ground or entrance floor of the building. And access to other levels of the building shall be provided as practical.

Any displays or written information, exhibits, documents, etc. should be located so that they can be seen by a seated person. And exhibits or signage that are displayed horizontally shall be no higher than 44 inches off the floor. And as a wheelchair user, 44 inches off the floor is really just about my eye level, so I feel very strongly about making sure that we have lowered signage and lowered exhibits.

Under the International Building Code, buildings must be designated as historic much like under the ADA. Accessible upgrades are still triggered by a change of occupancy or an alteration. Where compliance with the standard requirements under alterations like accessible entrances, accessible route, or an accessible toilet room, where those might threaten or destroy the historic significance of the building, then you're allowed to use some of the exceptions.

So here are the exceptions that are allowed for qualified historic buildings under the IBC. So you have to have at least one site arrival point, an accessible route from that to the building entrance. You must have at least one accessible route from the accessible entrance to the public space on the main level of the building, the same level as the accessible entrance. And you must have one accessible main entrance. Now, much like the ADA, you are allowed to substitute an unlocked non-public entrance or a locked accessible entrance with some kind of notification or remote monitoring so that the public can gain access easily, and, again, much like the ADA, an accessible family or assisted use toilet room.

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In closing, I’d like to share with you a project that I found quite by chance on a vacation that I think is a really excellent example of barrier removal at a historically significant site. We’re looking at images of the Vista House at Crown Point, which is in Oregon on the Colombia River Gorge. And it's a beautiful octagonal building intended as a rest stop along the scenic route. And it functions really as a place for people to view out over the river, and it has restrooms in the base. In its original configuration, there was no accessible route to the restrooms, and the entire building is set on a plinth of stairs, so there’s no accessible route into the building. You can see in the two images I’m showing here that they've installed a curved ramp that fits along this circular stair to provide an accessible route up onto the plinth that the building is sitting on. And it gives a lovely view along the way over the river.

And inside the building is absolutely symmetrical with the exception of a stair on each side. And if the challenge is where are you going to put an elevator in order to allow people to get down to the restrooms and what became an exhibit space. Well, this surprised me, but I thought it was a really inspired solution. They added a platform lift that rises up from the floor. So you can see in the left-hand image, when you enter the space, you have the pristine interior of this octagonal building and no obvious way to get downstairs. And there’s a sign that says, "Please ask the park ranger if you would like to have an accessible route downstairs." And low and behold, the platform lift or elevator cage rises out of the floor. You can enter and it'll take you back downstairs. It's really one of the most elegant solutions I've ever seen and actually a lot of fun to ride.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Define “technically infeasible.”

Throughout this seminar I used the term "if technically infeasible." Let me define that a little bit more. Basically it means if you have structural members that you cannot alter or site constraints that make it very difficult to bring a facility up to accessibility. If you have a toilet room that has a door that is too narrow, you would like to widen that door but you have structural members on both sides of the door, that might be considered technically infeasible. If you have an entrance that is not accessible that opens directly to the public way, for example in an urban setting where you have a sidewalk right up against the edge of the building, that might be technically infeasible. But the standard is very, very high. So you want to really think about whether or not it's truly technically infeasible or if there's some other way to go about making sure that your facility is as accessible as possible.

As a wheelchair user, what is your perspective about accessibility requirements?

As a wheelchair user, people often ask me my perspective about these accessibility requirements. Well, certainly I'm a big fan of them. Over my lifetime, I've seen the ADA come into play and over 20 years of change made to our communities. When I was a young girl as a wheelchair user, it was impossible to find a place to park where you could get out of your car or a bathroom in a restaurant that you could get in and use. And now, think about it, our kids are growing up assuming that there's an accessible toilet room in every restaurant or movie theater and that you should always be able to get an accessible parking space. That's fabulous. There's certainly a long ways to go. And these changes that we are requiring benefit more than just the obvious members of the disability community: wheelchair users or scooter users. They really benefit everybody. People can have temporary limitations, you know, a skiing injury or a mom with a doublewide stroller and two small children. They benefit from the ramp up to the building, from the wider doorways, the more accessible toilet rooms. So it's not just for people who are considered people with disabilities but everybody that benefit from these improvements. And the more that we can keep improving our existing building stock, the closer we'll get to having a community that's fully accessible.

FEEDBACK

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