

Los Angeles Times

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SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2000
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Up the Ramp to Full Access Construction

■ Perhaps most symbolic of the far-reaching effects of the 10-year-old Americans With Disabilities Act is the pathway to the front door.

By JESUS SANCHEZ
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A decade after it was adopted into law, the Americans With Disabilities Act has left its mark in ways large and small on nearly every new building in the nation.

Perhaps the biggest and most visible change has been at the front door, where ramps—once relegated to the lowly loading dock—are now a permanent fixture.

The presence of ramps everywhere from restaurants to sports stadiums is symbolic of the far-reaching impact the ADA has had in shaping the look and use of American buildings.

"It's an amazing thing to watch non-disabled people use the ramp instead of steps when given that option," said Kevin McGuire, a consultant who advises architects on accessible design. "Some architects will say, 'Screw the steps. We will just do the ramp.'"

The ADA, signed into law 10 years ago in July, goes way beyond making buildings accessible to the disabled.

It is a broad piece of civil rights legislation that prohibits discrimination against the disabled in employment, transportation, public accommodations and other areas. More than 40 million Americans are covered under provisions of the ADA.

The law, which was opposed by some business groups for being too costly and vague, has resulted in countless lawsuits involving business owners and architects accused of violating it.

Despite the controversy, the ramp and other changes triggered by the ADA are now considered by many as simply standard building fixtures.

"It's like you know you need to have windows and you have to have doors," said Ron Turner of NBBJ Architects of Los Angeles, which designed Staples Center and other stadium projects. "We

think about it from the very beginning."

Architects have transformed the ramp into a stylish design feature in some settings.

At Dodger Stadium, visitors to the new Dugout Club make a grand entrance via Turner's 60-foot-long ramp that flows past a display of team memorabilia and into the main seating area.

"The ramp was a response to the ADA and design issues," said Tim Carey of Catellus Development Corp., which managed the stadium renovation. "It worked out nicely."

"They are everywhere . . . built to fit into the terrain," said Los Angeles architect Ronald Altoon of the ramps at the Gardens of El Paseo. The ADA guidelines have forced architects to create buildings "more sensitive to the geography that surrounds them,"

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- Kevin McGuire,
McGuire Associates, Inc.
ADA consultant

A utilitarian ramp can be transformed into a design feature, but its true value remains as a no-nonsense tool to provide access to the disabled and the nation's growing elderly population, say disabled rights advocates.

In addition to providing ramps that meet minimum standards for width, pitch and resting areas, architects and property owners are under pressure to design building entrances that permit the disabled to share in the sense of arrival.

Often, ramps or mechanical lifts are placed to the side of the main entrance or in the rear of the building, an arrangement that many disabled people say leaves them feeling like second-class citizens.

"That's like being put in the back of the bus," said Eve Hill, executive director of the Western Law Center for Disability Rights in Los Angeles. "It is important to have the ramp be a regular way into the building instead of having to go all the way to the side or the back."

In some cases, a ramp can occupy as much as eight times more space than a stairway, according to Altoon.

"Because ramps take much more space . . . the entire project becomes more costly," he said.

In addition, some ramps—particularly at sports stadiums—can become forbiddingly long and tiring for those in a manual wheelchair or for the elderly, McGuire said. Some stadiums provide motorized carts to transport the disabled up multistoried ramps.

Still, McGuire and others prefer ramps to mechanical devices—such as lifts and elevators—that can break down and leave the disabled stranded.

At the massive Hollywood and Highland project under construction in Los Angeles, the challenge was to allow the disabled to participate "in the grandeur" of a 60-foot-wide staircase that will lead up into the retail, restaurant and hotel development from Hollywood Boulevard, said project architect Vaughn Davies.

The biggest complaints about ramps involve pre-ADA buildings that have been retrofitted.

But some of the ramps added to these structures are poorly designed by today's standards, design experts say.

McGuire recalls entering a St. Louis hotel on a narrow ramp enclosed with high walls that obstructed the view of a person in a wheelchair. Making matters worse, the ramp was used by bellhops running up and down with large pieces of luggage.

"If someone was coming, I couldn't see them until I was around the corner," McGuire said. "That ramp was an afterthought."

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