



So...podcast – Episode 7

Need more space for a sneaky kiss & cuddle? Try the Accessible Toilet!!

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You're listening to So...podcast with John McKenna

John: Greetings, John McKenna, So podcast. Big welcome to all listeners and transcription readers. I'm with Bruce Bromley today and we are going to be talking about accessibility. And guess what? We are going to have that hard conversation about accessible toilets. Yes, what does that mean? We are talking about disability, we are talking about a good place to change the baby, we are talking about a place to go and have a big kiss and a cuddle when no one's looking, got plenty of room. Believe me, there are a lot of weird stories out there about how disabled toilets are used. Bruce, welcome to the show.

Bruce: Thank you John, appreciate it.

John: Looking forward to unpacking the many aspects of accessibility. So lets kick off, I guess, with your own journey please.

Bruce: I started, probably, 20 plus years ago, when I was working with an architect's practice and the first project where I really got an understanding of disability was a special school and we delivered that one. That was actually up at Mildura. Then after that, we started working on more of them around Victoria and our practice became recognised by the department of education as specialists in that field. As part of that we were also undertaking work for a number of municipalities. City of Whittlesea, were one of the earlier ones that required access consultants to be part of the project's teams, to deliver compliance. I used to sit opposite access consultants, we would apply... or employ, and look at them and think I know as much as you, or almost, and it's a field I would love to get in to. So, one of the consultants Bob Callow, ended up becoming my mentor. Then about 14 years ago, not long married, baby, mortgage, no clients, I decided to start Equal Access and we've grown and grown in that time and are now up to 13 employees. So everything is going great.





John: Okay, let's really explain to everybody, when we talk about access, because access is one of those words that gets used a lot. You can have website accessibility, in your field I guess it's fair to say we are talking bricks and mortar.

Bruce: Not just bricks and mortar. We are looking at the whole built environment, so it could be bricks and mortar, in terms of buildings, but we also do a lot of, external environments, playgrounds, parks, accessible tourism. So it is quite a broad subject in that regards.

John: And, of course, another word we often hear is universal access. What is your view on how to explain that to a... if I was to send you to the Mars and say "Go up there and tell what people... what does universal access mean?"

Bruce: Really everyone, everywhere. Simple as that, so, if you design a building, that, for example a person in a wheelchair can access, the same applies to a mum with a pram, the same applies to the delivery driver delivering products and it doesn't just simply come down to the fact that, yes we have an accessible entrance, we have an accessible toilet, we've ticked the boxes and that's the mindset we find of a lot of people. There are a lot of other variables and with the diversity in the types of disability conditions there are, they all need to be taken into account, be it someone with a low vision, hearing impairment, how do we make their interaction with a built environment, a pleasant experience?

John: Exactly. Bruce, people travelling around um and its very much promoted to be independent as possible. There's an initiative which has been around a couple of years now, called Changing Places. Tell us a bit more about that please.

Bruce: One of my favourite subjects, probably going back again 14-15 years ago. I read some articles from the UK about changing places, toilets and I started blogging about it back then, and it was pretty difficult to getting any momentum then. We had Jack Mulholland out at Maroondah Council, who was a Metro Access Officer at the time.

John: What is changing places?





Bruce: Changing places are an adult size change facility for people with disabilities, so unlike just having a baby change table, when we have adults, for people with disability that go out into the community, have really three options. One is they allow themselves to be wet by the end of the day or if they have got carers or parents they have to be laid down on to a floor or a change mat to be changed, or only go out for a couple of hours at a time, and then come back home. Changing Places changed that completely because they provide an adult size change table, a hoist system which allows carers, parents to be able to be able to transfer people from their wheel chairs onto a toilet, onto a change table, maintain their dignity at the same time and enjoy life like everybody else. There is a great video with Liz Alice and she makes a comment, “Going to the toilet, shouldn’t be a privilege, it’s a human right” and Changing Places provide that opportunity for people with disability.

John: Okay. How many in Melbourne at the moment Bruce?

Bruce: Couldn’t tell you that. I know we were up to 129 Australia wide. We have got a number on the go in our practice and there is brand new technical standards that’s been up dated, and they are due out in the coming weeks, so yeah, improves the standards again.

John: Yeah. Is it fair to say that you get organisations, and can I say the word, Chadstone Shopping Centre. Is there one there?

Bruce: Yes, ah Chadstone has one. The MCG has one, we can look at tourism locations, Hamer Hall, all three zoos, Werribee, Melbourne and Healesville. So if you imagine... and that’s probably a good example, the zoos is perfect that, a family, as a family group, can now go out for the full day with siblings. And it could be the parent with a disability, it could be a child with a disability. But they can actually go out as a family for a whole day and if they need to go to the toilet, they have got the Changing Places there to use.

John: Sounds good. So in other words its basically an expansion on your existing disabled toilet, that everybody sees, but it’s a room which is bigger and it’s got more equipment, and really focuses on people. It’s fair thing to say, it’s not much difference between males





and females but quite often females require extra personal care and have extra challenges. So to have an environment that suits females is a really good thing.

Bruce: Absolutely, yeah.

John: Sounds good. So Bruce we have been talking about people travelling in the community. I want to talk about something that's actually, can I relate to myself, as someone who has worked in high rise buildings and as you know there is always fire drills go on, and they happen regularly. And so many times people have come up to me and said "Oh I understand there's going to be a fire evacuation". Either of two things happen, I get given a heads up to go out and have a coffee, which is not good because I should be part of that, and the other part of fire evacuation is the person stays on their floor, stays near the lift, do not get in that lift of course... actually correction, they stay near the stair well, not near the lift and someone will go and wait with them. And then if there is a fire, we never know. You've got a product, or you are very passionate about evacuating people with mobility challenges.

Bruce: Yes, it's one of my biggest bug bears. The building code of Australia over a number of years has been pushing harder and harder for compliance accessibility to get people with disability into buildings. But we still don't have any prescriptive requirements what so ever within those codes, that deal with the emergency evacuation of people with disabilities. And the first thing that happens when an alarm goes off, lifts return to ground, do not use lifts in an emergency. So as you quite rightly said, we hear horror stories about people being told no "wait at your desk while we have the fire drill" or "go out into the fire stair and wait until hopefully your rescued if there is an emergency". And one of the amusing comments about that also is, have a staff member work with you... wait with you at the same time. I actually posted this question in Canberra yesterday, when I was training, saying "hands up who, if that building was on fire and you were waiting on that landing with that person with a disability, how long would you wait there for or would you wait there for the entire time?" and it was pretty much agreed, everyone else would leave and I look at it even from my own perspective that I've got children at home that I'm responsible for, I shouldn't be in that position where I have to make such a decision, nor should the person with disability be excluded from an evacuation situation. So a few years after I started equal access we looked at what the international trends





were for emergency evacuation. In Europe, you know were miles ahead of us, even Italy, and the UK particularly, and they had products called evacuation chairs, which are a device that can take people with disabilities down multiple flights of stairs quickly, easily, safely, one of your colleagues needs to do that but you can escape a building, not much slower than what you would be walking down the stairs. And it just now provides a solution for that problem. All we need to do is get the emergency workplace standard and work cover on side to actually start taking this a bit more seriously, before we do have a tragedy, which is usually is the catalyst for change, for this to happen.

John: Lets talk about the device itself Bruce. We are talking about it's a stretcher model with, I'm going to say very crudely, and you can perhaps improve, it's like a stretcher on caterpillar wheels, like a tank has.

Bruce: Yeah, sort of. The one we mainly stock, it's pretty much like a chair. Our top level one has a H harness which goes over the shoulder so anyone with lack of upper body control is still restrained safely. It's got two tracks that come out the back of it which have rubber belts similar to the fan belt you will find on your car, and they simply glide down the concrete stairs. And yeah, you have full control as an operator and doesn't matter if you are 60 kilos or 150 kilos, um it's still quite a straight forward exercise to do, ah and most importantly, safe for all participants because we didn't want to introduce manual handling risks for the operators.

John: For sure. And of course Bruce we are not just talking about people with disabilities. We are talking about anybody that has trouble walking down a stair case fast, that could be a woman who is pregnant, it could be someone senior.

Bruce: You are speaking my language. Yep, and it could be the local football player who's broken his leg at the weekend, you know playing sport. You are right, someone might be post-operative, had surgery, so, heart issues where they can't walk down multiple flights of stairs. So, again we are looking at a universal work environment. Can everyone in my workplace get out?

John: Sure. Bruce I saw one the other day, I think it was on your site actually, the one for babies, for infants.





Bruce: Yes.

John: Okay that's...

Bruce: That's the newbie, that's only come out in the last 2 weeks

[over talking]

John: When I first saw that I thought, that's wow, cause a mother's instinct is always going to be, I love my child, I'll carry my child downstairs quickly. But obviously someone said yes, that's your heart speaking, but it's not necessarily your brain. So this is just a smaller version designed for all children, babies?

Bruce: Yeah, so it's primarily designed for around the NICU's or the the Neonatal Intensive Care Units, also nurseries. So you potentially won't have parent's there, you might have staff on a one to four, one to six ratio, so one staff member cannot safely evacuate four or six babies. Whereas as with this device you can put the babies in, it comes to... you can include the oxygen tanks, where required safely and again quickly, get down multiple flights of stairs, into a location of triage, where the babies can then be managed and potentially transferred to another hospital.

John: Obviously, Bruce you are a bit of a guru when it comes to access consulting. You have shared stories about your mentors and who you have met. Obviously you are always getting feedback from people with disabilities and other consumers?

Bruce: Oh, yes. Our governing body AC, Association Consultants in Access have conferences, we have CPD events.

John: CPD stands for?

Bruce: Continuing professional development.

John: Thank you.





Bruce: Then just colleagues. You know I've got some very, very good close friends with various disabilities and we always pick each others brains. You know I've got a specialist in the building legislation building compliance. They have lived the experience, they have qualifications in other areas where I don't specialise and we all work together. It's a very consultative environment that we work in, which is... makes it even more rewarding.

John: Cause, I must admit, throughout my journey as a wheelchair user, um I'm always having people say to me, we should be able to get here or, it's not fair we are not here and so the general public do care. Wouldn't mind getting your thoughts on old buildings that have been classified, and there's always going to be a work around for that. We all love old buildings, but at the end of the day if people with disabilities... do you think there's enough effort gone into adapting an old building without pulling it down, but to making it accessible?

Bruce: I think major buildings which are upgraded in that... yes. One of my favourite phone calls is from architects when they will call me and go "We can't touch the building cause it's heritage controlled." My immediate come back is, heritage is either a local or state government control. The *Disability Discrimination Act* is a federal piece of legislation, therefore it does take precedence, so let's work out how we can provide access in a manner that is respectful for the building but also for the people using it. And you know we have worked on some very high heritage control buildings...

John: Do they hang up when you say that? [laughing] I love your answer. I'm just sort of saying...

Bruce: Um, generally not, we have a habit of upsetting heritage consultants. But, generally we try and always be consultative, it's just work with them, um, to the point I've written a very detailed blog on our website which talks about how heritage controls can be applied. We had one of the theatres on the corner of Russell and Flinders, where all the entrance doors were one step up, so you had to step up to get in to the theatre. So any time there was shows on, the security would be there with a ramp, so anyone with a wheelchair would be able to get in. We suggested, let's, for a section of that landing, let's lift individually all of these tiny tessellated tiles, cut the landing out, ramp it out, ramp it,





lay the tessellated tiles back down. Heritage fit thought that was a great idea. We solved the problem, it's now universally accessible and to the lay person, they wouldn't even know we've changed the fabric of that heritage building so there are workarounds. Every now and then yes you will get a building where we might have to look at side entrances, so when we apply that, we need to look at good way finding signage to address that, because some buildings you just can't modify principal entrances.

John: We have spoken a lot about public buildings and public space. Talking now about the average person in the street, that has their own home, or about to start building their own home. Obviously they have family members visit, it could be a grandparents etc. Any tips that you might want to share to a new builder who is building a house to be able to look forward in the future. Cause also it's a 2 part question. How should young people start thinking about the house they are going to build and I'm also aware, correct me if I'm wrong, there have actually been a lot of developments with new styles of lift at the moment, where you don't have to dig a great big pit in the ground anymore, they're becoming cheaper, so we are seeing in these new 2 or 3 story homes where, don't call it a disability house but we seeing a lot more lifts available.

Bruce: Yeah, most of the new lifts now instead of using a hydraulic ram which sits below the lift, which is why we used to those large pits, now have a motor operation that sits on top of the lift car and pulls itself up. So they're fairly cheap and there is different models available, so they are not too bad. What was the other part of the question?

John: Oh just about if you are a new builder, what should go through your mind when you are building a house. There is obviously, are you going to stay there for many years, or perhaps you are hoping to sell it in about ten years. So any little tips you might like to share about building a good... cause we're all focused on a house which is ergonomically good, good for the environment and I would have thought you would line up all those tick boxes you'd perhaps touch on access. Things like a basic rolling shower.

Bruce: Yeah, so what you are probably talking about there is some legislation that came out a few years ago, and addresses aging in place. So you might be young when you move in to the house, but then as you age your demands or requirements within that house change. Anything from the provision of grab rails as you say on grade entrance into





showers, so there is a... not legislation, sorry, standards, it's called Livable Housing Australia, LHA. And that's got three levels of compliance for residential accommodation apart from New South Wales, everywhere else it's a voluntary piece of legislation but it is something to seriously consider because it makes those allowances for the human body as it ages. Doesn't address accessibility for wheelchair access, but it does address ageing.

John: Great. Bruce, really enjoyed this conversation for people that want more information about you and your service, website please?

Bruce: equalaccessgroup.com.au and then you'll get links to our consulting businesses and also our emergency prac... ah products.

John: Thank you everybody, listeners and transcription readers. We hope you enjoyed listening to the So... podcast. If you have, please tell the world because, I think, it is one of those issues around access is so important for all aspects, we are not just talking about people with physical needs but people with vision loss, people with hearing impairments and even people on the autism spectrum, who want to be able to know about different environments. So thank you Bruce and nice to meet you again.

Bruce: Much appreciated John, thank you.

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