EXCLUSIVE NEENA BHANDARI MON 27 JUN 22

[+] How Accessible Are Apartments and Do They Stack Up?

Accessibility in multi-residential apartment buildings has been wanting, but now developers and architects are incorporating features to make units more liveable for everyone. However, requirements of additional space and automation come at a cost.

“An additional 15 per cent floor area internally is required to fit all of the additional spatial requirements in a high physical support unit,” says Thirdi group’s general manager Ashleigh Button.

“In a market where construction costs are rising, every square metre counts. So, spatial constraint is the biggest challenge to incorporate accessibility.”

Access needs in the residential market encompass a larger cohort—people with disabilities, older Australians and families.

"We are seeing an overlap between general liveability and disability design in apartment buildings," says Allen Jack Cottier Architects' director Brian Mariotti.

"Wider doorways and hallways are required by wheelchair users and they are also more practical for young families to steer a pram, for example.

"We are currently working on a few residential projects that require 50 per cent liveable apartments. These units are not fully accessible, but 5 per cent bigger to provide for a bigger hallway or bathroom, or wider doors.

"We [also] need to accommodate 50 per cent mobility parking spaces, which are twice the size of standard parking spaces. That's a lot more area in a big apartment development."

▲ Thirdi has included SDA apartments in many of its projects, including Dairy Farmers Tower in Newcastle, NSW (above and main image).

Button tells *The Urban Developer* that to adapt a standard one or two-bedroom apartment in Thirdi's

recent Newcastle project to a high physical support unit will cost an additional $110,000 outside of the additional spatial requirements.

Advancements in technology are enabling architects and developers to incorporate accessibility.

Automated access to communal areas, voice announcement features in elevators and the building, swipe cards and facial recognition for entry, sophisticated smoke alarms and uninterrupted power supply battery backups—which were once expensive and only used in big office buildings—are now becoming cost-effective and being installed in residential buildings.

“Use of voice assistants, such as Alexa or Siri, to turn the lights on or draw the blinds, is going to become the new normal. These advancements in technology are offering amazing possibilities to make things accessible and retrofit them,” says Mariotti.

Developers and architects agree that if accessible features are factored in from the outset in the design and development of multi-residential buildings, it’s a lot easier and it mitigates the huge additional cost of adding a ramp or a bigger lift retrospectively.

“It’s about making buildings more resilient and fit-for-purpose for longer. Designs that are easy to adapt without making major changes in the future—for example, if a cabinet in the bathroom can be removed to make the washbasin work for a wheelchair user, it can allow people to age in their homes,” says Mariotti.

The fixtures and fittings—such as accessible toilets and vanities, and motorised kitchen benchtops—have also

come a long way during the past few years and often have the same aesthetic appeal as a standard range.

▲ Developers and architects agree that it is easier and more cost-effective to factor in accessible features from the very outset.

“In our seniors’ accommodation, we’re trying to incorporate non-invasive assistive technologies within our development,” Button says.

“They’re simple things. Using different colours in the hallways of each floor to assist with wayfinding; incorporating vanities that can take 70 to 80kg of direct force and become like a grab rail, if needed; and integrating LED-strip lighting under drawers so if someone falls in the bathroom, they can just open the drawer and the light will come on.”

She says that one of the key issues for accessibility is that there cannot be a universal approach because of the broad spectrum of physical and intellectual disabilities and their individual needs.

But where technology stops and the built environment

starts is becoming increasingly blurred, says director of Visionary Design Development, a specialist accessibility consultancy, Mary Ann Jackson.

“Under the Disability (Access to Premises – Buildings) Standards, the requirement in class two apartment buildings is, in very broad terms, that you only actually need accessibility to the front door of the apartment,” says Jackson, an architect and access consultant, who has had first-hand experience of the intersection between human needs and the built environment while caring for her husband.

“It hasn't been a requirement to have accessibility within an apartment. This is problematic because the multi-residential buildings have accessible hallways and lifts, but often the interiors are not very accessible.”

Jackson says that there is a lack of coherence in legislation across Australia. “An apartment building might be in compliance with the basic requirements of the regulations, but that does not necessarily make it usable,” she says.

“It’s because people with a disability and built environment practitioners generally don't mix and so there isn't that underlying understanding of how people with a disability would use the space.”

▲ Allen Jack Cottier' The Residences, Cardinal Freeman apartments feature full accessibility with wide doors and hallways, and reinforced bathroom walls for future modification.

Traditionally, disability accommodation was mostly excluded from the mainstream and these were probably the least desirable units within a development, but now they are very much integrated into multi-residential developments.

“Multi-residential definitely has a part to play in making communities inclusive and providing equal access to everyone,” says Button.

Thirdi has specialist disability accommodation (SDA) in many of its projects. From a small 14-unit development in Tweed Heads, where the majority of the apartments are priced under $1 million, to the high-end 182-unit Dairy Farmers Towers in Newcastle, which has a forecast gross development value of $200 million.

Accessible features are being incorporated seamlessly

in the design so they don't stand out as being special provisions or different.

"The design of the accessible apartment blends in with the design of the whole place and we are mindful of spreading accessible apartments throughout the building and not locate them all on the same floor," says Mariotti.

"Sometimes buildings, for example, have got a step to go to the balcony or the study. Now the norm is to make it seamless inside and out."

But given the added cost, will buyers be seeking units with accessible features?

"It's like a new car, where consumers expect that it will have all the modern safety features, but won't necessarily be more expensive," says Mariotti.

"It's the same with buildings, where accessibility features will become normal. And if you don't have it, those buildings will be less valuable or popular."
