# THE DIRECTOR'S CHAIR

**Karen Braitmayer's mission is accessibility. But she's not just addressing architects—she is one.** by Robert Klara

In a profession known for portfolios bursting with glossy photographs of dashing and colorful commissions, architect Karen Braitmayer is bound to raise some eyebrows when she speaks of what's in her own valise.

"What I do isn't glamorous," she says, a chuckle sneaking into her voice. "My portfolio consists of a lot of bathrooms and handrails."

She's not just being modest. A project roster for Studio Pacifica, the Seattle-based architectural firm that Braitmayer founded in 1991, is a catalog of entries such as "accessible circulation paths" and "barrier removal." Yet such unpretentious professional fare was enough to place Braitmayer among 80 others chosen for fellowship in the AIA last year. And despite the fact that she designs ramps more often than whole buildings, that's hardly diminished her profile: Her time is in demand—in existing structures, architectural offices, and construction sites nationally. "I travel across the country a lot," she says.

Yet when she does, Braitmayer is often discouraged. Some 15 years following the adoption of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), she routinely sees examples of inaccessible facilities: from restrooms with too-narrow stalls to doors obstructed by floor sills. And it's not like she has to pull out a tape measure to discern the offending conditions; she knows them because she can't use them. *Osteogenesis imperfecta*, a rare genetic bone disorder, causes Braitmayer to use a wheelchair. "I'm quite stumped as to how so many public accommodations miss the mark," she says. "I can't figure out where the flaw starts. Is it because architects don't understand the law, or is it the owner who insists on doing things his way?"

"In Seattle, there's a high level of ADA compliance," says Braitmayer, above, on the no-slip surface she specified for City Hall's glass pedestrian bridge. "But other places don't have that."

## CONTINUING EDUCATION

In the end, maybe that doesn't matter, because Braitmayer is out to change the situation (see "Leading by Example" page 32). While she's casually mannered and hardly given to sermonizing, Braitmayer's nonetheless become an ardent champion for accessibility. She's appeared in an episode of the popular ABC television series *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, on which she helped refit the house of a family with a boy who suffers from the same disorder Braitmayer does. In Seattle's city hall—which was designed by Bassetti Architects and Bohlin Cywinski Jackson in 2003—she pushed for no-slip flooring on a glass pedestrian bridge for the benefit of those using crutches and canes. But for the architectural profession, she's become something even greater: A critical voice who's not some fringe activist, but rather one of their own. "Architecture needs more people with disabilities to join the profession," she says. "Once we have more architects who see the world differently, we'll get more inclusiveness in design."

For now, however, Braitmayer has her own theses to nail to the door. She believes there should be continuing-education courses to help architects understand the ADA regulations ("Isn't the AIA an organization that could help to provide training like this?" she challenges), and she thinks that architects and community advocates for the disabled should find opportunities to interact with each other. "Architects are visual people, and if they have someone who can show them, it would really click."

Until it does, Braitmayer does daily field battle with the still-common misconception that accessibility is solely a mandate of the federal or local government. In fact, she argues, accessible design is simply good business. "Owners, and perhaps architects, too, have been slow to understand that people with disabilities are also consumers," she explains. "We have a choice of where to spend our money. And if we find a store or a hotel that makes it easy for us to get around, we will spend our money there. And not only will those businesses get my money, but the money of my family and friends—everybody who's with me on that visit."

## WORLD OF TOMORROW

She develops this point with a little crystal-ball gazing. The future, Braitmayer says, will not be a time when the ADA threatens its way toward uniform adoption. Rather, she says, the country is slowly moving to a point at which the concept

of "special" adjustments for the few are ceding to the higher ideal of universal design, which promotes optimal usage for everyone rather than satisfying minimum standards like those set forth in the law.

In the Seattle residential market, for example, architects are seeing an increasing number of clients who want accessibly designed homes (single-level layouts, wide doors, entrances without stairs) even though they're fully ambulatory people. Right now, the reason for this trend seems principally financial—in a runaway housing market, clients are realizing that their first house may indeed be the last one they can afford, so they're making plans to grow old in it. "Maybe it's age, too," she adds. "People are watching their parents get older, and thinking, 'What's going to happen to me when I get there?'"

As accessible design gains prevalence, Braitmayer says, its merits will become increasingly apparent, and then begin to move the market—that is, more than it has already. "If the consumer says to the developer that he needs a universally designed home, the developer will begin to adopt universal design in order to sell houses," she speculates. "That's the groundswell that will make the change."

For now, however, Braitmayer's portfolio continues to fill with the likes of grab-bars, ramps, and partitions. But for her, ease of use might be the most beautiful aspect of design anyway.

## LEADING BY EXAMPLE

In her efforts to boost the profile of universal design using her own work, Braitmayer's biggest hurdle may be that the best accessible designs aren't easy to pick out—they are, very often, remarkable for the absence of inaccessible design. For instance, contracted by the Puget Sound Environmental Learning Center, a retreat on Seattle's Bainbridge Island, Braitmayer was tasked with making a nature trail accessible for those who, like her, use a wheelchair. But she didn't specify asphalt paving or the cutting down of trees to straighten the trail. "We tested natural paving compounds," she says, "until we found the right mixture of materials that would bind together to create a firm and stable surface—but it still looked like a typical nature trail."

Braitmayer also often surprises nail-biting managers whose buildings are not in ADA compliance with the news that creating accessible facilities seldom means moving heaven and earth to let a wheelchair through; it's usually a bunch of small stuff. Called in to survey the restrooms in a high-rise in Seattle, for example, Braitmayer informed a much-relieved owner that the plumbing lines wouldn't have to be shifted to create wider toilet stalls on all 40 floors, just the partitions. Rather than removing the stone slabs at the door thresholds (a common, and literal, stumbling block for people with disabilities), she says "we just inserted wedges so you can get over them."

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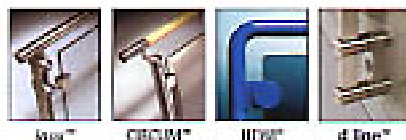

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