

News of the arts

Homes without handicaps

When Paul Duguay comes home from work in the late afternoon, he opens the front door of his house in Ottawa and enters the living room. If it is dark he can switch on the light; if it is stuffy he may open a window. From there he will go into the kitchen, plug in the electric kettle, and make himself a cup of tea.

A year ago none of this would have been possible for Duguay to accomplish without the help of his wife Simone. An accident the previous summer left him severely disabled and confined to a wheelchair.



Gilles Benoit

Sliding doors are easily opened from a wheelchair; light switches and temperature controls are within reach.

After coming out of hospital, however, it soon became clear that there was one big drawback to his gaining a measure of independence. The bungalow that Duguay and his wife owned was simply not designed to accommodate the needs of a handicapped person.

"I had a ramp built from the front door to the sidewalk, but that was about all I could do," he recalls. "I still needed help to get in and out and around the house, mainly because in so many areas, from the hallway to the bathroom, I had only limited space in which to turn my chair. Both my wife and I realized that we would have to look for a new and more suitable home."

Just about the time that Duguay's accident occurred, plans were being laid for a new co-operative housing project in Ottawa's Lowertown district.

This co-operative venture would be unique in two ways. First, it was to be entirely planned and operated by a group of physically handicapped people. And secondly, all ten homes in the project would be designed with the needs of a wheelchair-bound resident or similarly disabled person in mind.

Planning for the co-operative had begun in the summer of 1977, resulting from an idea of a handicapped accountant and three of his disabled friends.

"We knew that houses could be designed to accommodate a handicapped person, but such homes were custom-built and generally in the \$70,000-price range," said Charlie Sheppey, one of the co-op founders. "The people whom we wanted to help were those with low or average incomes. Generally, they would be occupying subsidized apartments which for one reason or another were unsuitable for their needs."

The men took their project to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and obtained a \$441,000 loan to cover the cost of the land, the construction of the ten homes, and the inclusion of the special appliances required by the disabled, such as grab-bars in the bathtub and toilet area, and stoves with control panels in the front.

By June 1979, the co-op was ready for occupancy and the first seven handicapped members (five of whom have families) moved in. By the fall, all units were filled.

Built on an infill site between two existing developments, L'Auberge comprises seven two-bedroom and three three-bed-



Level front door handle and low keyhole pose no problems from a wheelchair.



B. Cadzow, CMHC

The wash-basin with shallow front apron and extended waste pipe allows Luc Cousineau to move up close.

room homes. Rents range from \$343.50 for a two-bedroom row house to \$400 for a three-bedroom detached dwelling.

The specific guidelines to which the houses were built include entrances level with the street, making ramps unnecessary; no steps inside; hallways 152 mm wider than usual; wider bathroom and bedroom doorways; doors that slide into the wall; lower light switches; higher electrical outlets, 610 mm off the floor; lower front door handle; windows that open with a small lever; and level floor from living room to patio.

Paul Duguay, the first resident to move into L'Auberge, says the design has provided him with freedom of movement. "It gives me a sense of independence that I did not have before. I can do without help now in most of my daily activities," he said.

"For the first time in ten years it means that I can shave myself and clean my teeth without aid," said Luc Cousineau, another wheelchair-bound resident.

All the L'Auberge residents agree that having an accessible back yard is another great plus. For Beryl Dingwall, the quadriplegic victim of a diving accident, just being able to wheel himself outside is a gratifying new experience. "Living in an apartment building which had 21 steps from the door to the ground, I was virtually a prisoner in my own home," he recalls. "Now I just wheel my chair into the yard and watch my daughter play."

(Story by Julia Weston in Habitat (CMHC), No. 3, 1979.)

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