Universal Design: Quality for All

Universal Design is not a trend but an enduring design approach that assumes that the range of human ability is ordinary, not special (Preiser, 2001, p.1.3). According to Ron Mace “Universal design is an approach to design that incorporates products as well as building features which, to the greatest extent possible, can be used by everyone” (Preiser, 2001, p. 1.5). As the need for more accessible and well-designed environments is encroaching the move for communities and individuals alike to use universal design is slow moving. There are many myths about universal design that are keeping changes from being made. One myth is that Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other disability rights laws have established equality and therefore there is no need for further improvements (Levine, 2003, p. 7). However ADA only addresses the physical and sensory limitations of an individual but Universal Design goes beyond and addresses how people think and interpret things (Levine, 2003, p.7). ADA also focuses only on improvements for people with disabilities, which brings unnecessary attention to that group and perhaps adds to the stigma of disability itself (Levine, 2003, p.5). The creation of an “us” vs. “them” mentality develops, which isn’t surprising since history tells us that persons with disabilities were considered insane and sent to institutions. However in society today these views on disabled persons has changed and there should be a move to welcome them to the community and begin creating a “we” mentality. To begin to make the transition we must look at quality and how it is not an accident, but designed (Preiser, 2001). Over the course of our lives, the quality of each day is determined by our ability to meet the challenges we are presented with from the built environment (Moore). For those who are not-able bodied these challenges are difficult to overcome because everyday design is not supportive, forgiving, or universal. By utilizing the seven universal design principles we can begin to create environments that increase the quality of everyone’s lives no matter their limitations.