Integrating universal design (UD) within a person’s home and community buildings is an idea that is growing in acceptance today. However, the application of UD to the outdoor environment has been slower to gain a foothold in the public’s perception of accessible environments—despite the fact that, thanks to the media and trends toward going “green,” public awareness of environments that encourage a relationship with nature is increasing. The fact is, interaction with the natural world has been shown to promote improved health, foster an increase in physical strength and mental alertness, and encourage socialization.

Outdoor environments offer improvement in quality of life for everyone. Therefore, it is essential that UD features are incorporated into the outdoor environment so that people of all abilities can benefit from access to the natural world. We are all connected with nature. None of us can divorce ourselves from the basic fact that we rely on nature everyday. Many people start their day by checking the weather forecast to determine what they will wear and how the road conditions will be. Research has shown that a view of nature helps us to recover more quickly from illness, that natural absorption of vitamin D from sunlight helps strengthen bone tissue, that blood pressure levels lower when we experience scenes of nature, and that stress levels are reduced simply by viewing nature. On a more intuitive level, we know that we generally feel better after we have taken a walk in the park, have experienced the vibrant colors of a sunset or picked wildflowers for a special someone. We can all recall the many ways in which we have interacted with nature throughout the seasons. Maintaining that connection is essential to who and what we are as inhabitants of this planet. It is a basic necessity of a balanced lifestyle.

Certain design considerations are key in the creation of outdoor settings. Access to shade, available seating, appropriate walking surfaces and minimally sloped paths are just a few of the elements that allow a person to move about in the outdoor landscape. Of primary importance is the ability to move easily from one place to another. We all want to be able to decide in which direction we want to go and how we would like to get there, and to have the opportunity to do this effortlessly and independently.

Unimpeded access to the outdoor environment is the first consideration when applying UD to the outdoor setting. Many homes and/or buildings have steps that prohibit a person from moving independently between indoors and outdoors, so eliminating the steps to a front door and/or porch is a good place to begin. A ramp that is minimally sloped (two to three percent) up to the door makes it easy for a person to move freely in and out of the house or building. Other UD considerations include, but are not limited to, a landing in front of the door, a ledge to hold packages, easy-to-use handrails, sufficient area lighting and a wide, level walkway. Appropriate landscaping that allows a person to clearly see their way to the door or out into the yard can also make them feel secure and comfortable.

Whether it is a child eager to play in a sand box or an adult looking forward to working in the garden, people want to be able to go outside and enjoy their yard. A porch or deck is an important...
When outdoor environments are implemented correctly with universal design features, everyone moves through the space in the same way. There are no differences due to age or ability.