

So You Want To Build Houses, Eh? Transcript

00;00;00;00 - 00;00;22;09

Karen Brown

Welcome to Real Life Renos : The Podcast. I'm your host, Karen Brown, and if we haven't met, I'm an Aging in Place and accessibility strategist, as well as an educator in all things, leading a life that is independent, safe and dignified. Have you ever considered a career in construction, whether as a contractor, architect, or maybe a plumber, but felt drawn to making homes more accessible?

00;00;22;11 - 00;00;48;02

Karen Brown

If so, this episode is for you. Today I'm joined by Ron Wickman, an Edmonton based architect with decades of experience specializing in accessible design. But Ron's passion for accessibility isn't just professional, it's personal, rooted in experiences from his childhood. Together, we'll dive into how accessibility was taught in the past, how far we've come, and what you need to know if you want to make a real impact in this field.

00;00;48;04 - 00;00;53;11

Karen Brown

Let's get started. Welcome back Ron. It's always great to have you here.

00;00;53;13 - 00;00;55;11

Ron Wickman

Yeah, it's always great talking to you as well.

00;00;55;14 - 00;01;23;05

Karen Brown

Thank you. Today, or at least this year, marks 30 years that you have been in practice. So congratulations on that. That's really quite tremendous. For people who have not joined us before, can you give us a little bit of history about what led you to architecture as a career and specifically focusing on accessibility within architecture?

00;01;23;07 - 00;01;47;06

Ron Wickman

Sure, yeah. Very, very briefly and quickly. I, I grew up with, with my father being in a wheelchair. He he used a, a manual wheelchair. He, he had a spinal cord injury that happened just shortly after I was born. So in 1964, when I was, a few months old, my dad was hurt, and so I.

00;01;47;07 - 00;02;12;12

Ron Wickman

I kind of lived the 60s, 70s, especially, very influential years for me, moving about in the built environment, with somebody who used a wheelchair. So I certainly, learned a lot about, about, what that was like. The other thing that's really interesting, and I've in previous podcasts, I've mentioned it. My dad was a very strong advocate.

00;02;12;12 - 00;02;43;12

Ron Wickman

So he, you know, he later became a politician and he was always advocating for people with disabilities. So not only was I around him, I was around many people with many different types of disabilities, including cerebral palsy, people who had low vision, people who were deaf, you kind of, you name it. So it was really early in my life that I, in grade six, when I was 12, I said, I, I, you know, I learned what an architect was.

00;02;43;12 - 00;03;11;05

Ron Wickman

I didn't know exactly what that all meant, but I was like, yeah, I'd like to be able to design buildings and and make life easier for people with disabilities. And somehow or another, I just stayed on course and, here I am at 60 years old, doing the work that I do. And, and 30 years ago I started my own practice with the, with the specialty, of being an expert in, in accessibility.

00;03;11;05 - 00;03;20;12

Ron Wickman

And certainly in 30 years, I've, I think I finally feel like I might be close to being that kind of expert.

00;03;20;14 - 00;03;33;21

Karen Brown

That's one very good point. Because accessibility was not taught in school. So how did you gain your expertise in an educational sense?

00;03;33;23 - 00;04;09;04

Ron Wickman

So yeah, like even going even going back as far as as, my early years like pre university, we weren't really, exposed to children with disabilities. They would have been, housed or been schooled in other, other institutions. Outside of, regular, schooling. And so when I, when I was in high school, I started investigating what, what I would need to do to, get into a school of architecture.

00;04;09;04 - 00;04;43;26

Ron Wickman

So my research showed me that there was not a school of architecture in Edmonton. So I knew that I had to go somewhere, somewhere else. And, I, interestingly enough, my first thought when I was very, very young, even before high school was UCLA, because I knew that, Berkeley, and, California area, there was the, ground zero for the disability movement.

00;04;43;28 - 00;04;48;04

Karen Brown

It had nothing to do with sunshine, beaches, and girls.

00;04;48;06 - 00;05;14;21

Ron Wickman

Well, that's part of it. Yeah. That, that, that that became, you know, when I was younger, the, the girls thing didn't really factor into much, but certainly by high school that was that I would be thinking about things like that and yeah. But yeah, the idea of, of being in what I thought was maybe the most prominent school at the time that understood what disability and accessibility might be about was UCLA.

00;05;14;21 - 00;05;53;28

Ron Wickman

So not that I did like an enormous international research of that but definitely, everything was leading to, to that until, I found out how much it would actually cost to go to school anywhere else but in Canada. And that was quickly squashed, the dream of UCLA. So sticking to the West Coast, I always then started to envision myself going to the University of British Columbia and, and, and actually, not coming home.

00;05;53;28 - 00;06;28;27

Ron Wickman

So, so in high school, my thought process was that I would be a graduate of the University of British Columbia, and I would just stay and live there and work there. So, I think what I, as I talk a bit about the last 30 years of my life and, and sort of prior to that, although on the surface, my journey to, being an architect who specializes in accessibility might seem simple and clear, it wasn't quite as simple and clear as as all of that.

00;06;29;19 - 00;06;34;19

Karen Brown

Right. Right. So you ended up going to school on the East Coast?

00;06;34;22 - 00;07;01;29

Ron Wickman

I did, yeah. So to to go back to that, I thought again, more to do with, with saving money and reducing my student loans. I got my undergraduate degree here in Edmonton. So to go to, to go to UBC, you had to have a degree. So I got my arts degree here in Edmonton at the University of Alberta, which was at the time three years.

00;07;02;04 - 00;07;44;07

Ron Wickman

And I tried to take any kind, of course, that had even remotely something to do with design and architecture, which was really hard, to do. But, there were a few courses, more to do with things like environmental philosophy, environmental economics, that sort of thing. But it kind of gave me that background, to, to, start that journey of, of educating myself, as to, you know, what architecture

might be all about, as I researched what was required of me, and anybody applying to a school of architecture.

00;07;44;07 - 00;08;03;28

Ron Wickman

So although I was, kind of had all my eggs in one basket at the time, looking to UBC, I was looking at other universities just to see what they were asking for as well. So, for those, for those, people listening that might, might be thinking of, you know, what's it like to go to a school of architecture?

00;08;04;01 - 00;08;48;19

Ron Wickman

What does it take? Especially the application, by and large, schools of architecture worldwide, are interested in, in, accepting students that would have a more artistic and creative background. So, providing evidence of your artistic abilities is is absolutely essential and key to getting into a school of architecture. So, if I had to start over again, I probably would have would have got my undergrad degree more in the fine arts area.

00;08;48;21 - 00;09;11;03

Ron Wickman

Interestingly about myself, I was never really that artistic. I would argue that I still am not. So my, my background and my desire to be an architect had nothing to do with me being an artist. It had everything to do with me being more of a social activist, which is highly unusual. In the in the field for sure.

00;09;11;06 - 00;09;36;28

Ron Wickman

So I did, I did, apply to UBC and this would have been back in 80, 85, 1985. And, a, mentor architect of mine here in Edmonton at the time mentioned to me that the school was threatening to close down the School of Architecture and that I might be wise to, apply to some other schools, very last minute.

00;09;37;00 - 00;10;09;13

Ron Wickman

I did send an application into the University of Calgary and, it it was certainly my, my, misunderstanding and, and sort of being naive about the whole process that, when I spoke to somebody, at the university, they said, well, we'll send you a package and you fill it out, which was essentially just kind of a little bit like a resume, I guess you just you just had to show, your your marks.

00;10;09;13 - 00;10;30;28

Ron Wickman

Did you have any past experience, working in an office but what was what was one thing I learned is you had to provide a letter as to why you wanted to go to that particular school. So all the universities did this. Why do you want to go to our school? And why do you want to be an architect?

00;10;31;00 - 00;11;09;10

Ron Wickman

And the in the case of you, the University of Calgary, the portfolio is what we call collection of our artistic work. The portfolio was optional, which, in, in on paper, it says it's optional. In in reality, it's not you you had to provide that, so I didn't. And so again, on paper, my, my application to the University of Calgary was, was rather poor that I didn't have high marks, I didn't have work experience, I had no portfolio.

00;11;09;12 - 00;11;35;00

Ron Wickman

All I had going for me was I wanted to I, I, I was passionate about why I wanted to be an architect. My rejection letter from Calgary was was not subtle. It was you're not, you're not accepted and based on what you sent us, we recommend you don't ever reapply. Okay, so I'm not trying. I'm not trying to say any,

00;11;35;05 - 00;12;00;23

Ron Wickman

I'm not trying to say anything negative about the University of Calgary. And I have a bit of a relationship with the university. But but honestly, for me at the time, I, I just it if nothing else, it pushed me to just become an architect so I could go to that school and lecture and read the letter, which I never kept.

00;12;00;25 - 00;12;03;24

Karen Brown

You should have and you should have framed it. I mean, in hindsight, right?

00;12;04;00 - 00;12;35;05

Ron Wickman

I feel I feel like I yeah, I was, I always wanted to and then, you know, the time that I did do a lecture at the university, I, you know, I explain the story and I again, I'm not trying to be bitter or twisted about it. I just, I just think it was interesting because I do I do think that, by and large, any school of architecture anywhere in the world is just not pushing the agenda of accessibility in any way other than, you know, it's a code issue and you should you should care about it as a human being.

00;12;35;07 - 00;13;00;21

Ron Wickman

But, you know, they just they don't even have the professor skill set to really, really help students understand what accessibility is truly about. Right? So. Right. Worldwide, worldwide, if you, if you want to get into the design of accessibility, right now, it would be more industrial design, institutions that would be, would, would, you'd be better served.

00;13;00;24 - 00;13;25;13

Ron Wickman

But I, you know, I wanted to be an architect. I wanted to look at the world more globally in terms of our urban environment, how we build cities, how we build communities, not just how we build a house, but how everything is a collection that is interdependent on everything else. Right? So it's fine that it's fine that you can you, as somebody who is disabled, could live in a house.

00;13;25;15 - 00;13;53;16

Ron Wickman

But what if your community is not accessible? What if you can't get to the rec center? What if you can't go shopping? What if you can't do this or that? Can't even go to work, can't access public

transportation? And so it really was my background, you know, growing up around my dad as an advocate that helped me understand and appreciate that all of this is interconnected and has value all on it, you know, all as a collection of, of design, elements.

00:13:53:19 - 00:13:54:21

Ron Wickman
Right.

00:13:54:24 - 00:13:57:02

Karen Brown
So you ended up down east.

00:13:58:01 - 00:14:03:08

Karen Brown
And what did they have going for them in terms of teaching accessibility?

00:14:03:10 - 00:14:37:13

Ron Wickman
Nothing. But, but having having said that, there were, there were a couple of, of really dynamite things about, about the university. So it right now, just to be clear too, Dalhousie, it, houses the School of Architecture in, in Halifax. When I was going to the School of Architecture in Halifax, it actually was called the Technical University of Nova Scotia, or TUNS.

00:14:37:15 - 00:15:02:27

Ron Wickman
It was I graduated in 1991, and it was about 1996, I think somewhere around there that Dalhousie took over the school. So I often, I often when I meet young people and they ask me where I went to school, I, you know, I usually say Halifax. And then they ask me, oh, Dalhousie. And then, if I don't have really much time to talk, I just say, yes.

00:15:03:00 - 00:15:10:18

Ron Wickman

But if you want to, do you want to really hear my story? Then I'll tell you that technically, I didn't go to the university. Or I didn't go to Dalhousie. Right.

00;15;10;18 - 00;15;14;12

Karen Brown

So probably depends on their age as well whether. Yeah, yeah. Context.

00;15;14;18 - 00;15;37;19

Ron Wickman

Yeah yeah yeah, yeah. Because sometimes I meet somebody more my age and they're like, oh, you went to TUNS? And I'm like, yeah. Finally it'd be like if, you know, if Calgary took over Edmonton one day and I had to call myself a Calgary, and I'm not sure how easy that would be. You know, I want to still consider myself born and raised in Edmonton, so, yeah, you know, it was it was a little bit tricky.

00;15;37;22 - 00;16;04;06

Ron Wickman

But I love the East Coast. I loved living in Halifax. It's a tremendous city. It's quite it's quite walkable. Good access to a lot of amenities that are, you know, kind of close to where you live. So living, living in Halifax taught me a lot compared to Edmonton, which is a, you know, a bigger, sprawling city that you become really reliant on the car.

00;16;04;08 - 00;16;34;12

Ron Wickman

So I really enjoyed being a student in Halifax and, and, and living there. The school also has a, a work, program. So it's, it's a four it's a four year program, but it's three semesters a year rather than two. So technically in four years you're actually doing you're doing five years of university. But one of those years would be spread out in two work terms.

00;16;34;12 - 00;16;54;26

Ron Wickman

So a four month work term and then an eight month work term. So for sure, by the time you're finished school, you've at least been exposed to one year of of kind of real life working situation. And the university has tremendous access to different parts of the world. You know, previous graduates and so on.

00;16;54;26 - 00;17;05;21

Ron Wickman

So you could find yourself in, in Norway or, the Bahamas or, you know, wherever there might be, a potential to get work elsewhere.

00;17;05;24 - 00;17;10;07

Karen Brown

Is it still set up that way, like for anybody who's looking to go to architectural school now.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, yeah. It's still, it's it's still that way. Waterloo. It has a similar program. And I think those might be the only two. I, I definitely could be wrong about that. But I do remember Waterloo having a work program as well. Some of the schools will take you straight out of high school, like Waterloo again.

00;17;33;22 - 00;18;08;21

Ron Wickman

You, Yeah. So you, you get many, many applications. I think at the time that I applied, I'm sure it's probably higher today, but, 1 in 4 in for the University of Halifax are. Sorry. TUNS. You had a one in four chance of getting in and, and so, you know, there there were quite a number of people that applied and I, you know, I look back at that time and I, and I think to myself, somebody read my very passionate letter because that's really all I had going for me.

00;18;08;22 - 00;18;28;05

Ron Wickman

Honestly, was a letter that said, you know, I want to be an architect because I want to make the you know, I would say I'm trying to make the world better for people with disabilities. But really, the

argument I'm trying to make and, has always tried to make is I'm just trying to make the world better for everybody.

00;18;28;05 - 00;18;56;21

Ron Wickman

And if we if we can make it better for people with disabilities, then everybody else is just going to benefit from all of that. Right? So, it's it's it's, part of part of my issue today really, is that I'm sometimes pigeonholed into this like disability advocate or disability, you know, expert and and sometimes I'm not taken seriously as an architect and designer and urban planner and, you know, community planner.

00;18;56;23 - 00;19;08;00

Ron Wickman

But I really I really care about the environment. My, my work is very focused on sustainable issues and so on. So it's it's not just about ramps and accessible bathrooms. Right.

00;19;08;00 - 00;19;34;14

Karen Brown

So sure. But but given that the school TUNS had nothing going for it in terms of teaching accessibility, how did you learn that piece, other than your own personal experience? I mean, how how would a young person who wants to go to architectural school for similar reasons, wants to get a handle on accessibility? How would they do it?

00;19;34;16 - 00;19;58;24

Ron Wickman

Yeah. You know, for me, I, I, obviously my professors knew that I this was an important issue for me. You know, and unfortunately, at the time, I just kept getting told, well, you know, you one day you'll be out there working and and they have building codes and standards and all of that, but, you know, in the meantime, you know, you can you can try to bring to the table whatever you can.

00;19;58;24 - 00;20;21;15

Ron Wickman

But, we're we're probably not going to really, you know, these weren't words directly out of my professors mouths, but, you know, it's just not it's just not something that will get talked about, right, so that that was very that became very clear to me as I, you know, every time I designed and presented my work, the issue of accessibility just never really got much attention.

00;20;21;15 - 00;20;50;27

Ron Wickman

Right? It was just like, well, I made these decisions to make sure that, you know, somebody like my dad could actually get in the building and move about. And, and they wanted, you know, the discussion was more around the architectural idea. The use of light, ideas about spatial materials and frankly, a lot, you know, maybe and I again, I'm, I'm, I'm, I'm sharing my thoughts and so on.

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Ron Wickman

So I, I loved going to to architecture school. I love being an architect. I think I can be critical of some issues without without sounding like I'm bitter or something like that. But, you know, schools of architecture really do promote, concepts around how you present your idea. So drawings, models. Three, you know, today's 3D sketching, the way that the way that you're able to demonstrate and show your architectural ideas is critical.

00;21;23;17 - 00;21;46;06

Ron Wickman

And that's why I say the art aspect of being an architect is really pushed in schools of architecture. So, definitely people that were getting, you know, higher marks and so on were the ones that had these outstanding visual presentations, right. And so I, you know, I could I could do that as well, maybe not to the same extent as some of my classmates.

00;21;46;06 - 00;22;08;22

Ron Wickman

But, it always bothered me because I, you know, I kept thinking about, our other senses and how we use our other senses to experience a building. And in school, it's really hard because we

don't, we don't often get to go through existing buildings. We don't get to build what we designed, right, so it's all kind of conceptual.

00;22;08;24 - 00;22;29;07

Ron Wickman

So the visual really is pushed, and then of course that goes out into the real world so to speak. And, and again, the architects that tend to be celebrated in magazines and so on are the ones that are really pushing the, the envelope sort of speak in terms of, of art, the visual interest of the building, the building.

00;22;29;07 - 00;23;04;16

Ron Wickman

So, I, I think that, I think there is, there, there has been a slow progression to more and more architects understanding the, the sort of experiential, relationship of what we design to the people who use our designs. And that's something that just has to keep, keep being pushed. And frankly, I'm not sure how to make that happen, but, it just means that professors have to have had the exposure and experience in those areas, and then they can teach them right?

00;23;04;19 - 00;23;16;05

Karen Brown

Right. So in my head, I'm thinking that making something accessible doesn't also mean making it something other than beautiful.

00;23;16;07 - 00;23;23;11

Ron Wickman

Correct. But and it's got to be part of that design process right from the beginning, right. Not an add on.

00;23;23;13 - 00;23;48;04

Karen Brown

But they don't teach it. No, I mean, it's it's just not even in their sphere. So how would somebody going to school now understand the needs around accessibility. Would they have to do continuing education on their own? What would they do?

00;23;48;07 - 00;24;17;08

Ron Wickman

Yes. Yes. Some more continuing education on their own. They, they want one thing that's always worked well for me. And again, it's just, you know, part of my culture and the way I was raised, was always, volunteering for, with various groups, pushing for greater accessibility. So even at a young age, I was, I was part of that.

00;24;17;15 - 00;24;44;15

Ron Wickman

And so even while I was going to school, I was part of various groups related to, let's say spinal cord injury or, or, spinal bifida or cerebral palsy. So I just try to, get myself at, at a table where I could, I could hear other people talking about, you know, what are the issues and, and, and what can we do to, you know, make things better?

00;24;44;17 - 00;25;11;12

Ron Wickman

I, I would try to take advantage of any, extra courses other than my design courses to, again, learn more. So, we took other classes that related to, other aspects of building design. In terms of, let's say heating and cooling a building, structural systems, that sort of thing for it's really hard to build accessibility into all of that.

00;25;11;12 - 00;25;49;21

Ron Wickman

But, I was just always thinking about my designing through an accessibility lens, and, you know, at the time, yeah, I guess we always wish we knew then what we know today. But, you know, I didn't. So, I would try to get as much as I could out of my professors, but often it was, you know, looking back at it, it was it was hard because they, they, they didn't have the experience that they could sort of steer me in the right direction or say, hey, you should go talk to these people or those people.

00;25;49;23 - 00;26;23;06

Ron Wickman

In Halifax today, there's a much stronger atmosphere out there. The, Nova Scotia has the, Nova Scotians with, the, the act, the

Disability Act. Ontario has that, Manitoba has it. Alberta does not but, you know, you have more access now to to these sorts of things. There's, there's student student initiatives that can, can get involved in, in things like habitat for humanity, which is just, you know, building homes.

00;26;23;08 - 00;26;43;23

Ron Wickman

But sometimes that relates to accessibility as well, or other other community, initiatives that might, you know, might, might bring more attention to it, but it, it just means you have to you have to go over, you know, above and beyond your normal, class routine and find ways to educate yourself, right?

00;26;43;25 - 00;27;11;29

Karen Brown

So what I'm hearing is that if somebody wanted to go to school to be an architect and they had, a very keen interest in accessibility, they would take the lessons, for instance, when they're learning about how to design entrances and in their own heads, they're thinking about how that might be applied to be an accessible entrance. Or if you're talking about vertical transitions, same thing.

00;27;11;29 - 00;27;28;09

Karen Brown

You can learn about that stuff, but then you you have to, in your mind, formulate how that might be applied in a situation that requires accessibility. Is that right? So you'd have to really be a self-starter and and somewhat of an entrepreneur.

00;27;28;11 - 00;27;53;19

Ron Wickman

Yeah, yeah. You do in your own way. And, and you know, the other thing too, that, that, as somebody that, hasn't always been super talkative, I was a pretty shy kid, right and so pretty nervous in, in you know, presenting my work and so on. But, you know, something I certainly learned in school is, is your, your, your better

00;27;53;19 - 00;28;20;02

Ron Wickman

Architects are ones that can really kind of, I don't want to say sell the job, but, you know, can can really talk with authority and confidence, right? So confidence is a big is a big part of it. And, and you have to kind of be able to, bring that to the attention of the professors and, and don't ... the, a lot of the professors would take an interest in things that you were interested in?

00;28;20;02 - 00;28;47;14

Ron Wickman

If they if they could sort of really, latch on to your, you know, your passion for it, right? So it, it took me, it took me a long time to, to sort of gain that, and there, you know, by the time I finished school and I was working on my master's thesis, project there, you know, I had found a couple of the professors that tended to, be more helpful, in the area that I wanted to be in.

00;28;47;14 - 00;29;10;01

Ron Wickman

But, you know, again, I when I was going to school, we hadn't started computer technology yet, so there were no, there was no computer drafting. Everything was hand drafting. There was no internet or anything like that. So it's really hard to, like, search things out, right? So you, you go to the library and you'd find books and there wasn't a lot of information, out there to find. Nowadays

00;29;10;03 - 00;29;42;02

Ron Wickman

it, it certainly from a research point of view, if you want to take the time, you can you can definitely do that. Right. Like there's a lot of information out there. And there are way more experts out there too. So, don't hesitate to try to reach out to people. I certainly I get, I get lots of, calls, emails from, from, from students that have heard about me and they're reaching out to me from different parts of Canada and even even beyond Canada,

00;29;42;03 - 00;29;59;20

Ron Wickman

right. So students might, might have heard my name, or they did a search and they, they saw an article I wrote or, you know, a podcast I did, that kind of thing. And so, you know, I would have

just done it differently. I would have I would have tried to find phone numbers and found places like Hong Kong.

00;29;59;22 - 00;30;28;09

Ron Wickman

There's there's a gentleman in Hong Kong who's, was the one architect that I sent a letter to when I was still, still not in architecture school. That he responded, right. And so that's almost 40 years ago now and he was like, the only architect in the world that actually responded to me. And today we're working together on a project that he's heading in creating new, new accessibility standards in Hong Kong.

00;30;28;09 - 00;31;01;02

Ron Wickman

So all these years later, yeah. And so we recognize, because he basically he has worldwide, he has a number of different experts maybe about, I don't know, 10 or 12 of us from all over. Ireland is a particularly good country for accessibility. England is doing well. Australia is doing well. Japan. But we all we all Canada is actually one of those countries that is, is certainly near the top of accessibility issues.

00;31;01;04 - 00;31;23;29

Ron Wickman

But but every country kind of has their particular area that they're, they're good at, right? And, and so we're kind of learning from each other and it's really it's, it's pretty amazing to, to share all the information that, we can get and, and from, from all our countries. So I'm all these years later, I'm really, I'm really finding that quite powerful.

00;31;24;06 - 00;31;32;03

Ron Wickman

And if you were a student and you somehow figured out a way to tap into something like that, that would just be like gold for you.

00;31;32;05 - 00;31;38;21

Karen Brown

Right? So all you want to be architects out there, be entrepreneurial and be bold.

00;31;38;23 - 00;31;41;11

Ron Wickman

Yes, absolutely. Yeah. Right.

00;31;41;13 - 00;32;00;21

Karen Brown

And the same is true of trades. I know that you and I both spend a fair amount of time on any given project educating different trades about accessibility and why it matters. And do this, not that because they don't teach it in trade schools either.

00;32;00;22 - 00;32;01;29

Ron Wickman

That's right, that's right.

00;32;02;05 - 00;32;04;27

Karen Brown

They didn't then and they still don't.

00;32;04;29 - 00;32;32;03

Ron Wickman

Yeah. We've. we've certainly, you know, for myself, it's probably easier in this day and age, but again, you know, a lot of the trades, are pretty seasoned and they've been around at a time when, accessibility just wasn't really thought much of, right? So it's certainly a challenge. And it's something that every job that I do, and work on, I try not just to tell the trades what to do.

00;32;32;04 - 00;32;48;06

Ron Wickman

Like just you know, put to grab bar here. I tell them, I tell them why the grab bar's there. And I try to explain how putting the grab bar there, you know, so, you know, I'll sit on a chair or something and go, look, this is somebody sitting on the toilet. You know, this is why we put this here.

00;32;48;06 - 00;33;10;17

Ron Wickman

This is how they would reach it. So definitely it takes more time on my part to to be part of that education process. But I just think, you know, that person installing the grab bar is suddenly another, another person out there that's, I've given a bit of time to that will start sharing it with other trades and other people hopefully.

00:33;10;17 - 00:33;17;29

Ron Wickman

Right. That would be the that would be the intent. And then just spread and then it just spreads, right? The knowledge just starts to spread.

00:33;18;01 - 00:33;20;27

Karen Brown

Understanding the needs of the end users.

00:33;21;00 - 00:33;28;16

Ron Wickman

So I always yeah, I always try to take advantage of the time that I have with trades and so on to, to educate as much as possible.

00:33;28;19 - 00:34;07;16

Karen Brown

I feel that one thing that anyone who is working with customers would make themselves invaluable for is being able to have real conversations. Whether you're an architect or a contractor or any member of any trade, having those uncomfortable conversations about how the bathroom is used, how they want to do laundry, how they want to use the kitchen, how they want to get in and out of their house or their car, or just the why they do what they do and how they want to do it better.

00:34;07;22 - 00:34;32;01

Karen Brown

So boning up your customer service skills, if you will, or you're you're getting rid of the shyness and being bold again and having those conversations with end users about what they do and why they do it is an education just in and of itself. Because no two

people are going to be the same. Right. That's right. You have those conversations with your clients,

00;34;32;01 - 00;34;32;19

Karen Brown

I know you do.

00;34;32;21 - 00;34;54;28

Ron Wickman

Yeah. And that, you know, and that that goes beyond. Well, not that I have very many clients that. that don't have disabilities, you know, at least one family member. So, you know, again, almost 100% of my projects are focused on at least one person in the family having a disability. But yeah, like any, any project I work on, I want that feedback.

00;34;54;28 - 00;35;22;20

Ron Wickman

Right. So, I'm not I'm not inclined to want to tell my client, look, this is what you should do because it looks so awesome. This is like, I want to find out what the how it's going to work for them first. So tell me how you use the kitchen and where you want certain things. And then I'll use that to to give you an effective design that functions really well for you.

00;35;22;22 - 00;35;43;09

Ron Wickman

And I'm going to make it look pretty awesome too, right. And, and that, you know, frankly, that what looks awesome to one person may not be to the other. So, you do residential work and you do something that your client loves, and then they go, yeah, but, you know, my neighbor came over and said that was kind of a dumb idea.

00;35;43;10 - 00;35;59;17

Ron Wickman

I should have done it like this. Right? So our Uncle Joe came over and, you know, said, oh, man, that architect doesn't know what they're doing. And so everybody has their opinions and, you know, all that kind of stuff. So if if you're just relying on the visual, you'll,

you'll never win, right? There's always going to be people that don't like what you've done visually.

00;35;59;20 - 00;36;24;08

Ron Wickman

Why did they pick that color or you know, that texture or whatever. But if you, if your design process is always based on making it more effective for somebody that really requires that, that extra function. So I made this the way it is so somebody sitting in a wheelchair can reach it more easily, or somebody with low vision can see it more easily.

00;36;24;10 - 00;36;51;16

Ron Wickman

All of a sudden it's pretty hard for anybody to argue that that was a dumb idea, right? Because everything's about. So why did you pick that color? You know, well, there's color theory out there. So you try to pick a color that is easy to see. That's actually why I mean, I found this out, a number of years ago, but yellow is one of the last colors that our aging eyes still sees,

00;36;51;16 - 00;37;15;14

Ron Wickman

right? So that's why you often see yellow in our, our tactile, warning tiles that you might see on your, your rapid transit or at the top of stairs or at curb ramps, that sort of thing. So, you know, people have done, people have done the research and the yellow is there for a reason, not just because somebody decided yellow is their favorite color.

00;37;15;17 - 00;37;36;27

Ron Wickman

So so I you know, I love that. And, you know, I often thought, this is years ago and I'm not going to do it now. But I always thought that I should go back and get a PhD, and I would just do, I would do my thesis based on what I just said is like actually designing functional design, that, is about people with low vision.

00;37;36;27 - 00;37;54;06

Ron Wickman

That was, that was really, that was really something I was interested in. And then I thought, I kind of do that in work. So I don't really need a PhD to, to, to really do the research on that. I can, I can just, you know, I get enough clients that that challenge me with those thoughts. Right.

00;37;54;08 - 00;37;55;27

Ron Wickman

And those, those concepts.

00;37;56;00 - 00;38;05;06

Karen Brown

That's such an interesting piece of the conversation, though, because it's not just, oh, gee, I like the walls to be blue.

00;38;05;09 - 00;38;05;26

Ron Wickman

Exactly.

00;38;05;26 - 00;38;14;29

Karen Brown

There's a reason there's there's a why behind it, and it has to do directly with how an individual will use that space.

00;38;15;02 - 00;38;32;14

Ron Wickman

Yeah. And, and actually like taking that comment back to school that, that separated the good students from the bad students is if you could answer that question: Why? Why did you do this? Why did you do it that way? Why did you, you know, why did you pick that color? Why did you pick that texture? Why did you know?

00;38;32;17 - 00;38;53;13

Ron Wickman

If you could answer the whys confidently and it made sense to the professors that was your, that was your line to an A, an A+. You know, the the gold medal for your, you know, the best thesis like the why was always what the professors were looking for. So you, you can't just go I design it because I like it.

00;38;53;13 - 00;39;16;19

Ron Wickman

I think it looks good, right? Like, okay, well, it doesn't look good to me so D. Yeah. So you know, that ability to talk with confidence and really be able to rationalize what you're doing, was was how you, how you did well in school, which makes absolute sense. That's how you should conduct yourself in, in the workforce as well.

00;39;16;19 - 00;39;37;23

Ron Wickman

Really. That's how you should conduct yourself as a human being. You should be able to answer why you do and say the things you do, do and say. Often we don't, right? But, in design it's critical. That we, we do things that, aren't just for us. We're not, we're not artists in that sense. Right?

00;39;37;23 - 00;39;59;28

Ron Wickman

We're not just painting or doing a sculpture because we want to, and we want to explore our own creativity. This is, this is a public, this is a public duty that we have to make sure it works for as many people as we can. And it just has always seemed a shame to me that, we ignore the needs of people with disabilities.

00;40;00;00 - 00;40;39;09

Karen Brown

Right. Well, and and disability issues as well. We can talk about an aging process because that affects all of us. So, you know, people just have to look at their parents and grandparents and see what issues they face. But, I mean, I'm learning a lot in this conversation. So people who want to be architects or go to a trade school because that's their passion or their path in life, do that, but reach out and explore how your other interests could be utilized within the context of that course.

00;40;39;11 - 00;41;14;05

Karen Brown

Be entrepreneurial. Be bold. Have the conversations with people. I mean, you can do, extra education credit once you've graduated,

but even taking an extra credit in something to do with accessibility in this case would not necessarily teach you the needs of everybody that you're going to deal with who has a disability. So having those conversations with people about how they use the space and why things need to be the way that they say. Don't impose code.

00;41;14;08 - 00;41;37;06

Karen Brown

Let's say again, code is the least you have to do to avoid getting sued. And we can do that, right. Yeah. We can, we can do so much better. But it, it is all about how they will use the space, not how, not how we as professionals in any career path think they ought to use the, the space or what we've been taught.

00;41;37;08 - 00;41;42;19

Karen Brown

But what they tell us have I summed that up nicely?

00;41;42;22 - 00;42;14;22

Ron Wickman

That's, that's quite, quite well done. Yeah, and it, yeah it's, it's, it's that experience that allows me to work and, and sort of speak with confidence myself, right, which frankly, in school I didn't have that confidence. Because I didn't always know. I knew, I knew what I was doing. I could always rationalize the why. Often I couldn't articulate it, in a way that others could understand.

00;42;14;25 - 00;42;46;01

Ron Wickman

Like, like my professors or even my my classmates. And even to this day, sometimes it's really hard, right? So, I, I think the people that seem to enjoy and appreciate what I have to say are people that have a kind of internal curiosity about the world and life. So, I, I would say as architect, it's always it's always important to remain curious, for all of us, really.

00;42;46;01 - 00;43;12;15

Ron Wickman

But where I would really, like to see more of that curiosity is from the building industry. I think too often, a labourer or somebody like, you know, is on a job site, framing, for many reasons, largely because they're, they've, they're told not to ask questions, just do what you're told to do.

00:43;12;18 - 00:43;31;03

Ron Wickman

Just frame this wall, you know, don't ask questions. The drawings say put, you know, backing on the walls. I think I'm always amazed when somebody goes yeah, like, why are we doing this? I haven't done this yet on any other house. Like, why are we putting, why are we putting this plywood on the walls in the bathroom?

00:43;31;05 - 00:43;51;14

Ron Wickman

And then I explain, right. And unfortunately, there might, you know, that young person who's curious and wants to know because they genuinely want to know, could get scolded by a boss saying, don't talk to the architect and you're wasting time like I pay you by the hour, you know, like you, so you just don't want to see stuff like that, right?

00:43;51;14 - 00:44;21;27

Ron Wickman

You want to see a community on a job site where everybody is collectively trying to get better at what they do and, and understand and appreciate what the goals are. And it comes to us, as the architects often we're, sort of at the head of that, right? And we we have to help everybody understand and appreciate why those lines on that piece of paper are there and what they, what they mean, and the other written instructions.

00:44;21;27 - 00:44;41;27

Ron Wickman

Why did we say it that way? And like, what's our intent? And if I can get people to understand why I'm doing what I'm doing and why I drew it that way, and why I'm asking you to do it that way. The greatest joy for me is when when I get, when I get somebody on the job site going, I'm thinking about what you did there.

00;44;41;27 - 00;45;18;07

Ron Wickman

And what if we do this? And I'm like, wow, that's amazing. Like, I, I didn't think about that, but that's a great idea. And they're like, yeah, well, you know, I framed something else and this is how it, I just thought of that. And I'm like, that's a great idea. Let's do it, right. So, you know, that kind of stuff is certainly in the 30 years that that there hasn't been much I can say that's been super negative for me, but certainly one of the things, a trend that I've noticed in the industry is that, there is more isolation of the architect or the architecture team and the builders, and there should be

00;45;18;10 - 00;45;36;26

Ron Wickman

there seem to be more, community in all of that when I was younger and I found that, there was everybody had a good spirit on the job site and wanted to do it for all of what I felt was all the right reasons. And I don't know that today that just seems to be a harder challenge.

00;45;37;01 - 00;46;02;12

Ron Wickman

And we're all busier, I guess. I, it's harder to make money. I don't know, I, I don't think those things are true, but that's just it just is harder. In this day and age to, maybe were afraid to get sued or it's going to cost us money if we make a mistake. But all that kind of stuff, seems to dissuade us from from, reaching out to each other and trying to, you know, learn from each other.

00;46;02;15 - 00;46;39;24

Karen Brown

Right. Well, it sounds like in the 30 years of your practice, there is precious little that has changed in terms of access to information about accessibility. What has changed is the knowledge about accessibility that is everywhere that people can access from anywhere on their computers. You don't have to write a letter anymore. Yeah, somebody in Japan or call them you, you, you can

reach out, you know, to the Rons and the Karens and the, the studies, the universities.

00:46:39;27 - 00:47:11;09

Karen Brown

You can reach out. And there is so much learning that can be done that way. And there is an equal amount of learning that can be done just by talking with the end user. And that's just maybe something that wasn't quite as dominant when you first went into practice. I think there's a lot of really good information in this podcast for people who are interested in either architecture or any kind of trade, and also has an interest in, in all things accessibility.

00:47:11;12 - 00:47:17;25

Karen Brown

Before we wrap up, is there anything that you would like to say last words?

00:47:17;28 - 00:47:44;03

Ron Wickman

Yeah, I think I think the one thing I'd like to reinforce, I've already said it during this podcast, but, for those that are truly interested in learning more about all things accessible, about accessibility, take the time to volunteer. You'd be amazed, as to how much you learn, from being part of, of of any kind of group that's out there.

00:47:44;03 - 00:48:21;26

Ron Wickman

There's so many there's so many different groups. And I'm sure there's somebody in your family that might have, if nothing else they're aging, but issues around low vision, hearing loss, physical disabilities, neurodivergent. See if I'm saying that right. Neurodivergent. Different intellectual disabilities that are out there. There's just so much and, and you, you, you gain more than just being, you know, getting warm, fuzzy feelings in your heart.

00:48:21;26 - 00:48:45;12

Ron Wickman

You, you, you gain knowledge. You you get better at your own craft. Whatever it is that you're doing. And if you want to, if you

want to make a business case for it, too. All my volunteer hours that I've done over the years have actually, and I don't do it for this reason but if you want to go there, I'll go there.

00:48:45:14 - 00:49:08:03

Ron Wickman

They've gotten me, it's gotten me work, right? So it's. it's, it's not just that I do this, I do it with passion, but I, but I recognize that I meet people even talking to that builder, that subtree that's putting the grab bar up. I explain to that person, why the grab bar is where it is.

00:49:08:05 - 00:49:31:18

Ron Wickman

Three months down the road, they're talking to somebody and, and they're saying, yeah, we got to install a grab bar for my mom in her house, and that person is going to remember, hey, I remember the architect. You know, he, you should talk to him. He seems to know what he's doing. Like, this all has a way of coming back to help you from a business point of view too again, if you want to go there and, you know, at the end of the day, I.

00:49:31:18 - 00:49:47:26

Ron Wickman

I, I am in business too to, I have to feed my family and pay my, my bills and all that kind of stuff too. So, it's just not all about just being a volunteer and giving your time away. It it has so many different benefits.

00:49:47:28 - 00:49:56:11

Karen Brown

Right? It's a win win. I love it. It is. That's a really great way to bring this podcast to a close. So thank you very much, Ron for joining us again.

00:49:56:13 - 00:49:57:23

Ron Wickman

Oh, you're welcome. Yeah I enjoyed it.

00:49:58:00 - 00:50:20:09

Karen Brown

I look forward to the next time. And to all of our listeners and viewers, thank you very much for joining us. I hope you learned a lot, and I look forward to seeing you again on the next episode of Real Life Renos : The Podcast.

00;50;20;12 - 00;50;29;05

Unknown