

## Architects look for 'elegant solutions'

Architects don't just design beautiful buildings, they also spend time looking for functional – and interesting – ways to meet state requirements.

"We're always thinking of more sophisticated ways to meet code requirements – hoping to find elegant solutions," said Bob Kuchman, AIA, who designed New Harmony Mutual Housing Community in Davis.



New Harmony Mutual Housing Community on Cowell Boulevard in South Davis was designed to be as welcoming as possible to disabled residents and visitors. The three-story building has elevators, wider halls and doors, enough kitchen and bathroom floor space for a wheelchair and other additions such as shower grab-bar backings.

*Photo by Domin Photography*

Mutual Housing California develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development. For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at [mutualhousing.com](http://mutualhousing.com).

One of the "little touches" at the 69-unit apartment complex on Cowell Boulevard that Kuchman found for people who have lost their hearing was a doorbell that flashes instead of rings. "It looks like a little red box the size of your hand," he said.

Architects working in Davis not only face strict California state regulations on disability issues, but also more stringent Davis guidelines – especially when it comes to what's known as "visit-ability."

This approach means being able to go into any public space, such as restaurants and movie theaters, as required by state law and also to private ones, such as apartment buildings and single-family homes.

"We want to create a more accessible community so that people who are disabled can go anywhere they want, and as our residents age, they can keep up with their normal lives," said Dan Wolk, Davis mayor pro tem.

To do this, Davis officials ask developers to build stacked flats rather than townhomes.

Mutual Housing California and its local affiliate, Yolo Mutual Housing Association, are unusual among affordable housing developers in their preference for building townhomes for families because residents prefer the feeling of privacy in them.

"Since residents are involved in governing of our nonprofit – and of our individual communities – it was a big change for us to have stacked flats," said Rachel Iskow, Mutual Housing chief executive officer.

Because Mutual Housing chose to continue building in Davis – and because the agency also prides itself on being at the forefront of social



change – it readily agreed not only to stacked flats, but also to elevators.

California law requires elevators only in buildings that are four stories and higher. New Harmony is three stories tall.

“Unless it’s a senior community, architects seldom see elevators put in with that few floors,” said Kuchman, principal of Kuchman Architects PC. “It’s typically a walk-up. It was very unusual, and a big commitment on the part of Mutual Housing to add elevators.”

The commitment was not only philosophical, but financial. The elevators added nearly \$200,000 to construction costs.

Having elevators rather than stairs, however, meant that people in wheelchairs would be able visit friends at the community.

“It’s very important for a cohesive community to have everyone be able to enjoy the benefits, especially of being able to come and go easily,” Wolk said.

Because putting in elevators triggered a state requirement to make all units adaptable, the remaining apartments were constructed so that each unit could be made handicap-accessible with a few modifications.

All apartments at New Harmony have wider halls and doors, enough kitchen and bathroom floor space for a wheelchair as well as other additions such as shower grab-bar backings.

If a person in a wheelchair moves in but all accessible apartments are occupied, management can upgrade one of the other units, so the person does not have to be placed on a waiting list.

“The remaining 80 percent were constructed so that with just a few modifications, each can be made fully accessible if a wheelchair-bound resident moves in,” Iskow said.

“Besides making bathrooms big enough for wheelchair turns, and some other small changes, those adaptable units are made possible by installing an elevator in each of the buildings.

“It was a stretch for us, but one we were willing to do.”

Because of the funding, 20 percent of the apartments had to be accessible, four times more than usually required.

While accessible apartments usually are only on the first floor, with elevators, the ones at New Harmony could be located on any floor.

“Why shouldn’t people in wheelchairs be able to live on the top floor and have access to the same views as everyone else – to be able to see the cityscape or the sunset?” Kuchman asked.

Founded in 1988, Mutual Housing California develops and operates rental housing throughout the region. The communities have 3,000 residents, nearly half of whom are children.

For more information, visit [www.mutualhousing.com](http://www.mutualhousing.com).