



A HANDICAPPED-ACCESSIBLE HOME IN JEFFERSONVILLE  
COMBINES FUNCTION AND ELEGANCE

# CHALLENGING EXPECTATIONS

BY CRONIN SLEEPER / PHOTOS BY CAROLYN BATES

**N**OTHING from the driveway suggested “handicapped” at all. What I saw was a beautiful three-story wooden house with large windows, an expansive wraparound deck, and stunning views of Mount Mansfield in the distance. I realized I had unwittingly carried a bias: handicapped-accessible architecture could not possibly be elegant and desirable. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Bronwyn Smith met me at the door seated in her wheelchair. I had expected a steps-and-ramp arrangement, but in fact the entry path follows an ever-so-slight rise, beautifully landscaped and covered with gravel. One simply walks or wheels up to the front door and enters.

Bronwyn moved to Vermont in 1978 to attend Johnson State College. Injuries sus-

tained in a 1989 car accident left her handicapped, technically a quadriplegic, though she has limited use of her arms and hands. Eventually Bronwyn moved into her mother’s garage, which had been adapted for her needs. In 1994, she met her partner Gary Sisco, after a Burlington City Council meeting which discussed kids congregating on Church Street and how that was hindering handicapped and elderly access to stores. Ironically, Bronwyn was there in favor of the kids. “They were just being kids,” she says. The approaches and doorways to the stores were the real problem.

Bronwyn and Gary set out to find a house that could accommodate both of them, as well as a full-time caregiver who would have separate living quarters. They soon discovered it would be less expensive, and ultimately more satisfactory, to build from

scratch rather than retrofit an existing house.

The couple decided to settle in Jeffersonville, where members of both sides of the family already lived. (Bronwyn admits that it is helpful in her situation to live near family.) Her brother, Woody, helped find 59 acres of mostly hilly woodland, overlooking a beautiful valley and surrounded by a bowl of mountains. The view was the biggest attraction, that and the fact that the site was private but not remote.

Bronwyn and Gary then interviewed three architects and ultimately selected M.B. Cushman Design, of Stowe. Their work is characterized by an understated elegance that appealed to the couple; they also liked the firm’s use of natural light and how they thoughtfully sited buildings as an integral part of the landscape. Conklin Construction of Morrisville was hired as general contractor, with Steve Martin acting as the project manager and head builder.

THE 2,506-SQUARE-FOOT HOUSE, which is built into a hill and has a walk-out basement level and two floors above, has a relatively simple floor plan. The first floor contains one large great room, with a bedroom/dressing room suite off to one side and a screened-in porch off the other. On the second floor is a library and hall area, and another bedroom with bath and dressing room. An extension off the back of the house has a two-car garage with a 516-square-foot caretaker’s apartment above. The caregiver’s apartment – which comprises a bedroom, bath, full kitchen, and living room – is accessible to the main house through an upstairs door and also has a private outside entrance.

Once inside the main room, I can see why Gary describes it as “living outside with a roof over your head.” Windows are everywhere. The view of Mount Mansfield is spectacular. Nestled into a hillside, perched up high, the house has a feeling of safety and comfort. Kitchen, living room, and dining room coexist in one big open space. Overhead a 9½-foot high ceiling rises to the exposed beams of the home’s partial timber frame construction.

Bronwyn and Gary considered possible resale when designing their home, but overall they concentrated on creating a place in which they would be comfortable while meeting Bronwyn’s special needs. Bronwyn is quick to point out that as she lives with an





Above, Bronwyn and Gary in the living room.

Right, a view of the kitchen area.



able-bodied person, the challenge was to design the house to accommodate both an able-bodied person and a handicapped one. The house would need some modifications if a handicapped person were to live there alone.

The beauty of this house is that few if any of its “handicapped features” are obvious. Doorways are wide, with pocket doors which slip inside the wall except when privacy or quiet are desired. Floor transitions are smooth, both between rooms and the interior and exterior. All the clad Weather-shield windows are casement and wind to the outside. (This also comes in handy when it’s time to clean the windows.) The openness of the space makes maneuvering a wheelchair possible anywhere in the house. The only obvious handicapped feature is an elevator which goes to all three floors, but even that seems tucked away with its door closed. Storage throughout the home has wide and shallow dimensions – ideally suited for any house, but easily accessible from a wheelchair.

Bronwyn begins the tour of the kitchen by saying that Gary is really the family cook. A beautiful space with Vermont green slate counters (from Stowe Forge & Stone Works) and red birch kitchen cabinets (the handiwork of Don McCormick of Elmore) is simple and open and “loaded on the bottom,” according to Bronwyn. The lower cupboards are actually pull-out, frontless shelves, with kitchen equipment in full view

and available with just a pull. Drawers throughout the kitchen are wide and large. Most countertops are conventional height, 36 inches high, ideal for the stand-up kitchen worker. One countertop is 6 inches lower to accommodate Bronwyn’s wheelchair, which neatly slips under and is an ideal work space for her; it also doubles as an exceptionally pleasant spot for morning coffee, surrounded by large windows.

In the living room a glass-fronted gas stove perched on a square pedestal was installed as a decorative element, but it has proven useful in keeping the home toasty. Throughout the house the floors are either slate (with radiant heat over a concrete slab), or rustic birch; the walls are painted a warm color, but the real beauty of the room comes from the breathtaking view.

Adjacent to the kitchen is the first-floor bedroom, the spot in the house most carefully considered with Bronwyn in mind. A home health care worker comes each morning to help bathe and dress Bronwyn, and her live-in caregiver helps her retire each night. It was important to Bronwyn that since she does require care, this “work space” be ample so that a caregiver would have a pleasant working environment. There’s plenty of space to maneuver around Bronwyn and her wheelchair. The vanity in the bathroom is a perfect height for Bronwyn to slip under with her wheelchair. The shower is huge, with no door, and large enough for Bronwyn and her caregiver to

occupy together. There is even room for a window in the shower, which lets in lots of natural light. Still, none of these special features look particularly *special*, that is, geared to a handicapped person. All are designed with function in mind, but comfortable living is equally important.

The only piece of furniture in the spacious and sunny first floor bedroom is the bed. I was totally unaware that this was a hospital bed until later when Gary pointed out the emergency generator in the utility room. “If not for this backup system,” Gary said, “last year during a power outage the bed would have been stuck in the upright position for fourteen hours.”

Bronwyn’s favorite space is the laundry room just off the kitchen. A washer and dryer, located

under green slate counters, are separated by a large work sink. The whole work area is at a height Bronwyn can easily use. An enormous hanging pegboard and a built-in cupboard hold cleaning and laundry supplies, as well as linens. Future plans call for converting additional space in the basement into an exercise room with a small swimming pool.

Among other subtle accommodations for Bronwyn are easily accessible bookshelves and a sophisticated storage system for CDs and records; there is even under-the-bed storage in pull-out drawers for audio tapes. The family’s two dogs – large Rhodesian Ridgebacks named Rex and Ruka who serve as the family’s “security system” – have figured in the home’s overall design. If Bronwyn is home alone, two dog-doors allow the pets to travel from the entry hall to the garage and then out to a fenced-in area, where they can safely communicate with the coyotes, foxes, deer, and bears that frequent the property.

As Bronwyn escorts me to the door, wheeling her chair through the sunlight-filled great room, I’m struck by how comfortable she is in this new space. She is the perfect hostess: gracious, at ease, in charge. She is truly at home. **V**

*For more information on the design of the Smith-Sisco home, contact Milford Cushman, principal of the architectural firm M.B. Cushman Design, P.O. Box 655, Stowe, VT 05672. 802-253-2169. E-mail: design@mbcd.net.*