



# A Moving Experience

BY MARK MATHEW BRAUNSTEIN

**WHEN DISABILITY COMES KNOCKING ON YOUR DOOR, YOU USUALLY HAVE TO WIDEN IT.**

When the Grim Wheeler knocked on mine, that door was to the ground floor of a two-story house. Lucky me, because had I resided on its second floor, I would have been left homeless. To accommodate a shining new wheelchair, my thankfully few home modifications included widening two doorways and constructing a ramp. But after wheeling around that house for the past 23 years, the time came to pull up stakes and pitch my tent elsewhere.

Searching for a new home opens the door to a world of possibilities, limited mostly by income, and as a college librar-

ian and wannabe writer, mine is modest. Yet even billionaires have budgets. After income, my next major constraint was topological. Residing in coastal Connecticut, I hoped to remain along the shoreline. When immobilizing ice and snow sometimes blanket the state inland, the coast often gets rain instead. So within a narrow corridor east or west, I sought a single-story house on a level yard abutting some woods. Or a meadow. Or even a swamp. In short, a house with a nice view, and a view with a nice house — all parameters which significantly leveled the playing field.

## SEARCH FOR SHELTER

Before pathways to information were widened by the web, prospective home buyers contacted real estate agents who in turn consulted their personal rolodexes. Nowadays, buyers and sellers and realtors alike can log on to many of the same websites, most notably [www.trulia.com](http://www.trulia.com), [www.zillow.com](http://www.zillow.com), and [www.realtor.com](http://www.realtor.com). While sidestepping a realtor may seem frugal, in most transactions in most states it is the seller who pays the commissions to the agents for both buyer and seller. So the buyer has nothing to lose.

Just as doctors routinely practice patient management, patients, too, must practice doctor management. No one can advocate on our behalf

better than we can. The realtor I contacted was the best of his profession and took a personal interest in my architectural needs because his aging father was presently grappling with similar issues. Furthermore, the agent patiently and thoroughly answered my many questions as a first-time home buyer. Nevertheless, had I relied solely upon him or anyone else, mine would have been an agonizingly long search. I allowed 18 months for finding my wheelchair-adaptable dream house, but found it within only four months because of all the Web browsing and drive-by viewing I conducted myself.

Did I settle for less? Sure did. Always do. Because time devoted to searching is time

lost to adapting. So how did I spend those few months trolling the Internet?

## SURREAL ESTATE

Listings on the many real estate websites largely overlap, so I frequented just one whose interface saved searches in a way I preferred, and if any home piqued my interest, I then verified its current market status on [www.realtor.com](http://www.realtor.com) (whose interface, however, eludes my easy navigation). The dirty little (now not so) secret is that on websites other than [realtor.com](http://realtor.com), many real estate agents intentionally delay updating the status of newly sold homes. They do so just in case the bank mortgage is not approved or because of sundry other deal breakers, during which time they can interest buyers in other homes. So some of the homes on the housing market websites actually exist only on the surreal estate market.

Equally surreal are the keywords “handicap” and “single story.”

Handicap “features” do not necessarily mean “wheelchair accessible.” If a towel rack is replaced with a grab bar, that warrants listing as a handicap feature. No kidding. Even a ramp added to the front entrance may hold only a false promise to what lurks inside. Ideally one might hope to find a house whose previous occupant was a wheeler (and who miraculously again became ambulatory, and so moved to the mountains), but Goldilocks would be very lucky to find a Papa Bear in whose wheelchair-accessible home she could sit. Goldilocks has to make the home accessible on her own.

In realtor lingo, some homes are declaimed as “fixer-uppers” or in need of TLC, while others you can “just move right in.” Reality renders all other homes into various stages between the

two. But for wheelchair users, all homes are fixer-uppers.

So, in my Internet search, I tried using the keywords “single-story” (both with and without the quotes and both with and without the hyphen), and found that the internal search engines are so inept that such keywords yield only a plethora of “single family homes.” Ditto for the “property type” categorized as “Ranch/Rambler,” because most ranch houses are actually raised ranches. Thus “single story” has behind it more than one story, few of them synonymous with “single level living.”

So forget keyword searching, and simply proceed down

up. A step or even two steps between rooms. Or a sunken living room or den. Or windows elevated so high off the floor that when you are seated, the window sill is flush with your forehead. Or hookups for washer and dryer installed in the impenetrable basement. Or in the kitchen, major appliances with major annoyances. Or in the bathroom, toilets and tubs that only a wrecking crew could modify.

Beware of any array of photos that omits the bathroom, as that likely signifies it is too small to be captured by even the widest of wide angle lenses. And just why does that smallest room in the house also

rounding neighborhoods as well as the depth of the woodland in a backyard or across the street, which all too often proves to be a thin veneer. Both are needed for the virtual flight, but Bing’s aircraft offers far better views.

Google’s perpendicular 90-degree “satellite” view shows only rooftops. Its “Earth” view fabricates only a poor illusion of a side view, and only from the south. Whereas with Bing, when you zoom in on any densely populated area, Bing provides inclined 45-degree, true “bird’s-eye” views, navigable from all four points of the compass. Such views reveal all the exterior walls and doors of



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the Search box: Location, click; Price Range, click; Number of Bedrooms, click; Square Footage, click; Property Type, click; and then Search, click ... and prepare to scroll through hundreds of homes whose homepage photos very helpfully display their front entrance façades.

For every 50 homes that look like single stories from the front, glimpses of their photos from their rear or side façades prove otherwise for 49 of them. And for that one semifinalist, interior photos reveal further obstacles to trip you

have the narrowest doorway? Narrow-minded architects must never have imagined any need to wheel a piano into a bathroom.

## MAPPING THE TERRITORY

With 50 homes narrowed down to one, it’s time now for some aerial reconnaissance, courtesy of Google Maps at [maps.google.com](http://maps.google.com) and Bing Maps at [maps.bing.com](http://maps.bing.com).

Both show the intersecting streets to the left and right of the house. Both show the sur-

rounding neighborhoods as well as the depth of the woodland in a backyard or across the street, which all too often proves to be a thin veneer. Both are needed for the virtual flight, but Bing’s aircraft offers far better views. Both are needed for the virtual flight, but Bing’s aircraft offers far better views. Both are needed for the virtual flight, but Bing’s aircraft offers far better views.

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revises and replaces its satellite views. Twice, the dense woods abutting a backyard in Bing Maps became on Google Maps a clearcut site for new construction — probably a condo complex or shopping mall.

If a house passes inspection on Google Maps, the next step is the real live in-person drive-by viewing. This I did before

making an appointment for any house showing, thereby potentially not wasting just my time but also that of both real estate agents. This drive-by viewing was an important step, because no matter how hard I tried to squint or to magnify it with image editing software, few photos enabled me to count the number of steps leading to the front door.

### **A GRAND STAIRCASE**

Most wheelchair ramps turn out to be awful eyesores that detract from rather than enhance the exteriors of homes, so the shorter the better. And the shorter, the cheaper too. The ADA standard of 1:12 slope ratio (1 inch of elevation for each 12 inches of ramp) applies to businesses and workplaces.

Private residences are exempt. Nevertheless, a good guideline is to not exceed a 1:10 ratio. Another ratio seldom discussed is 1:1000. Every step adds approximately \$1,000 to the price tag. Thus, each step costs a cool grand, defining a new kind of grand staircase.

Esthetics and economics are not the only reasons for

limiting the length of the ramp. There's the practical matter of transit time upon the ramp itself, especially because it takes two trips to lug on the lap what requires only one trip to carry with hands set free from propelling the wheelchair. Plus, during autumn there are leaves to sweep, and during winter ice to melt and snow to shovel.

So setting my limit to the number of front door steps to three, after dozens of drive-by viewings and hundreds of online map searches and thousands of realty website pokes, I sought appointments to tour the interiors of just six homes, and upon the sixth I found the home of my dreams. One especially attractive feature it offers, which I had not counted on, is a two-car garage adjoining the house. With a two-step-up ramp built inside the second garage space, I never again will need to shovel snow off the ramp.



## HOUSEBROKEN

Before moving in, I found among its other unanticipated renovations that the house needed new flooring. Despite a sinking feeling in my wheelchair due to the thick, fluffy under-padding, I had intended to keep the old carpets. But soon after buying the home in May, summer heat began brewing a stench of urine from the previous owner's cat marking its territory. So the flooring was replaced, much to my initial dismay but eventual benefit. The old cushy carpets would have made for an arduous and very slow slog around the house.

Some windows, too, needed replacement, as they barely admitted in any fresh air. In the room that would become my study, I planned to set up my computer workstation by the window that peers into the woodland abutting the backyard. Except for one minor detail. Seated in my wheelchair, I could not see out the window, whose bottom sill began right at my eye level. That window not only was replaced, but also greatly expanded, again to my benefit.

I now have moved in, but am not yet home free. Other access modifications still are

waiting in the wings. Yet after the largest acquisition of one's life, most homebuyers are broke. Which adds a new definition to the word "housebroken." Perhaps I made several missteps in selecting this as my home, and if I could do it again, maybe, just maybe, I would have passed on this house and continued my search for several more months. The journey of 1,000 steps begins with 999 steps. I had to start somewhere, so someplace had to become my first home in which I would learn from my mistakes.

Fortunately, you can be a first-time homeowner only once.

*Mark Mathew Braunstein lived for 26 years in a nature preserve, and now the nature remains preserved in him. You can read his previous NEW MOBILITY articles at [www.MarkBraunstein.org](http://www.MarkBraunstein.org).*