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Bringing Égalité Home



Valerio Mezzanotti for The New York Times

ABLE In a house outside Paris, Jean-Yves Prodel, who uses a wheelchair, is living comfortably thanks to innovative renovations for which he will get a Universal Design Award in March. [More Photos >](#)

By **ELAINE SCIOLINO**
Published: February 18, 2009

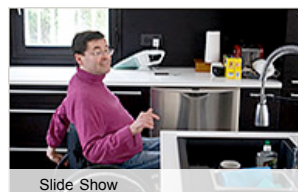
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WHEN Jean-Yves Prodel, who lives alone and uses a wheelchair, bought a 20-year-old house in this town just north of Paris in 2005, he hired an architect to remake it following the principles of [universal design](#).

As Mr. Prodel soon discovered, however, his architect had no idea what that meant; moreover, he made Mr. Prodel feel like a bit of an idiot.

“I told him I needed the floors to be flat everywhere — into the shower, out to the patio, from room to room,” Mr. Prodel said, recalling the day they first toured the house together. “He kept saying, ‘It’s impossible — no, it’s not possible.’ It was the start of a big nightmare, a really big nightmare.”

The arguments went on for months, and Stephane Du Bois, a Belgian technician who was installing an automated-lighting system in the house, couldn’t help overhearing them. One day, after the architect left, he

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decided to intervene. He told Mr. Prodel that he was an architect himself and would be happy to take over the job.

Four years later, the house is still a work in progress. But Mr. Prodel, who suffers from a rare genetic disease called Werdnig-Hoffmann that causes [spinal muscular atrophy](#)

and has forced him to spend much of his 44 years in a wheelchair, is able to live in the house comfortably.

"In France, if you say 'universal design,' people are totally lost," said Mr. Prodel, who started a universal design consulting firm of his own around the time he bought the house. Most French designers and architects, he added, have little tolerance for the concept, which holds that products and buildings should be usable by everyone, without requiring glaring adaptations to accommodate physical differences.

Japan and the Scandinavian countries, Mr. Prodel said, have long been at the forefront of universal design, a movement conceived in the United States in the late 1980s in response to the stigma attached to design for people with disabilities. Norway has even incorporated the concept into its antidiscrimination legislation. A number of other European countries, too, are now starting to invest in the concept, but "architects in France think they know everything," Mr. Prodel said. "As a result, we're 20 years behind here."

Mr. Prodel began to show signs of Werdnig-Hoffmann disease when he was 2 and was suddenly unable to walk properly. Today, he is paralyzed below the waist and has limited strength in his arms and hands.

Living in a country that is not disability-friendly has not always been easy. As a business student in Montpellier after high school, Mr. Prodel had to rely on classmates to carry him and his wheelchair up and down the stairs.

In 1989, however, he enrolled at the [University of Illinois](#) at Urbana-Champaign as an undergraduate. There, he discovered that a disability-friendly home did not have to look institutional. His room was equipped and laid out for someone in a wheelchair, he said, yet "it looked like a regular student's dorm room.

"Compared to a French university, where they have nothing, it was a dream."

Years later, when he began planning his renovation project, he treated it as both an intellectual and a living experiment in the possibilities of universal design. Although he was used to sharing his home — he had been married for seven years to his onetime physical therapist, and was living part time with a woman when the project began — he set out to make a place that he, or anyone else, could easily navigate alone.

He would have liked "to have started with a blank canvas," he said, but having grown up in this area, he wanted to stay, and the high cost of land here made building from scratch as expensive as buying a house that he could move into right away. So he bought and renovated an existing structure — a conventional French country-style vacation home. He replaced what he described as traditional appointments with sleek modern detailing and furnishings, and blithely destroyed the center-hall, two-window symmetry of the front-garden facade with a glass wall. He left the large, high-ceilinged living room intact, along with a ground-floor bedroom, but he combined the kitchen and dining room that adjoin the living room on one side, and built an addition on the other with a spa and garage on the ground floor and an open studio above.

Examples of universal design are everywhere. The main kitchen counters are built lower than usual, about 32 inches from the ground, an ideal height for children, the elderly, the disabled, and just about everyone who is not 6 1/2 feet tall, Mr. Prodel said. Appliances include a Nespresso coffeemaker, which uses easy-to-insert coffee capsules rather than measured grounds, a one-touch Riviera & Bar electric citrus juicer and a Black & Decker electric jar opener. The Scholtès oven allows its user to press a single

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button to cook a “poulet rôti” (roast chicken), another to bake “gâteaux” (cakes) — an extreme simplicity of operation that Mr. Prodel describes as a sort of “informal” universal design.

The furniture is functional, too. In Mr. Prodel’s bedroom, the bed is the same height as his wheelchair, which makes moving between them easier.

Electrical controls for the entire house are within easy reach. The shower area off the bedroom is equipped with a broad sink, which his wheelchair can slide under, and the shower is fitted with a cushiony white folding chair made by the Danish company Pressalit Care.

Another small room has been outfitted with a toilet 20 inches above floor level, several inches higher than normal, so that Mr. Prodel can easily transfer himself. In the spa room, super-heated to help Mr. Prodel keep his muscles warm and prevent cramping, an IGAT-180 push-button pool lift (made by the American company Aquatic Access) with a Belgian-made harness allows him to lift himself out of his wheelchair and into a 20-foot-long heated pool. There, he swims and does exercises.

Throughout the house, electrical outlets are 16 inches above the floor rather than 8, and switches are 40 inches above the floor, several inches lower than usual — heights that are equally easy for Mr. Prodel or an able-bodied adult to reach.

A motion-sensitive lighting system keeps the house illuminated as people move through it, though in the automatic way of many such systems, if there is already enough natural light in a room, the lights stay off.

Sliding interior doors of lightweight plastic, made to look like wenge wood, disappear into the walls with a gentle push; sliding glass doors, also easy for Mr. Prodel to maneuver, open onto the patio and back garden from the kitchen. Opening the patio door also extends an awning over it. “You suddenly don’t live inside anymore — you have another room out there,” he said.

A color-coded remote control that Mr. Prodel keeps with him allows him to open and close the property’s front gate, as well as the house’s front door, which operates with an electrified magnet. Outside, a flat asphalt walk surrounds the large flower garden and lawn in front of and behind the house, which is hidden from the street by a high cedar hedge.

Mr. Prodel’s next project, he said, will be to install an elevator on one side of the kitchen so he can get to the basement and second floor, which have yet to be renovated to conform to universal design principles. Three extra bedrooms on the upper floor are used for able-bodied house guests; he plans to turn the balcony area into a sitting room for a book club. In addition to Mr. Prodel’s fondness for minimalist modern furnishings, the house shows off the interior design taste of his former girlfriend: an arrangement of artificial orchids on the coffee table, a large brass and crystal chandelier hanging from the living room ceiling, plaster elephant sculptures, straw and feather owls and an ornate gilt-framed mirror at the entrance. “It’s modern, but not too modern,” he said, adding that he finds the mix “amusing.”

Next month, in recognition of the house’s innovations, it will receive the 2009 Universal Design Award for a residence from Universal Design G.m.b.H., a German company that promotes accessibility. Mr. Prodel sees the house as a showcase, he said, and hopes it will influence residential design in France. But he does not see himself as a savior: his consulting firm offers “services to professionals” for offices and commercial and institutional spaces. “You can’t imagine how many people call me and say, ‘Mr. Prodel, my husband is in a wheelchair and I need help.’ I say, ‘Sorry, I don’t work for private persons.’”

But in the professional realm, at least, he does seem like a man with a mission. He has put together a computer presentation that opens with bugles and drums and the words,

“Conception Universelle,” the French translation of universal design. It includes some of his picks for the least-accessible “accessible” places in France — places he believes are ideal candidates for universal design: the Pullman Paris Tour Eiffel Hotel, formerly the Hilton (“I thought I was in a hospital room of 40 years ago,” he said of a wheelchair-accessible room); handicapped parking places in Paris that are framed by poles that would be easy to crash into; certain train ramps that allow for four-wheel but not three-wheel scooters; the Gare Montparnasse in Paris, where the elevator is broken much of the time.

So far he has only two institutional clients: the City of Compiègne, 30 miles northeast of here, and its regional government. He said he is advising them on how to make a new bridge project comply with universal design principles.

In addition to spreading universal design in France, he has more modest goals. “Oh, if I could take the train on my own to Paris, I would,” he said. “Oh, it’s too complicated. But that would be so nice.”

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