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who built their
own accessible
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The dream house



Emma Bowler meets the architects who built a designer 'ramp house' for their disabled daughter

Visually striking, contemporary and, best of all, ultra-accessible, the Ramp House wouldn't be out of place on the Channel 4 series *Grand Designs*.

Designed by architects Ian McMillan and Thea Chambers, the house has won an award from the Edinburgh Architecture Association and a commendation from the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors.

Ian says winning such accolades is good news: "It's important to be recognised by your peers," he says, "but what's more important is getting the recognition that wheelchair accessible designs can look fantastic. It is bringing disability to the forefront of people's attention so they think we can make accessibility look good, look contemporary, rather than just meeting regulations."

The inspiration for the house was the couple's eight-year-old daughter, Greta, who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair. The family had been living in a traditional Victorian terraced house close to the shops and where Greta and her

11-year-old sister Beatrice go to school. But the family's needs were changing.

"We were carrying Greta up and down the stairs and that wouldn't have worked long term," says Ian. "We couldn't extend or adapt our house, so the traditional thing to have done would have been to move to a bungalow in the suburbs. We didn't want to do that as it would have made getting to school more difficult and we wouldn't have been around in the community anymore."

Location, location

Having found a centrally located plot of land in the Edinburgh suburb of Portobello, Ian and Thea then had the challenge of designing an accessible family home in a rather small space.

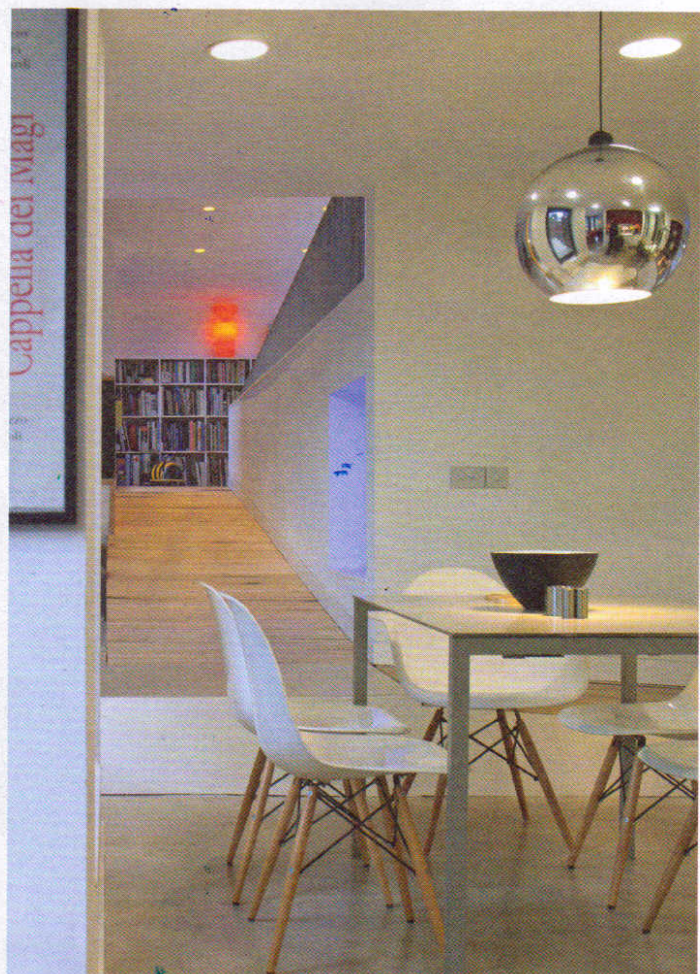
"The site was just too small for a house on one level, so we needed two levels," he said. "We really didn't want a lift because that would have led to inequality – us using the stairs and Greta using the lift. So we turned the idea on its head and we designed a ramp first – then built the house around it."

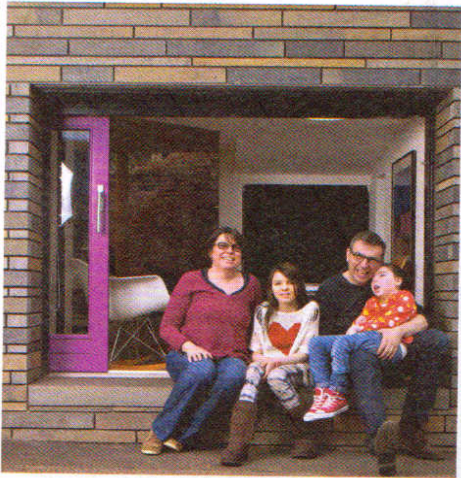
Rather than simply connecting the ground floor to the first floor, the house has five levels linked together via a single 28 metre-long ramp, the longest section of which is seven metres.

"The biggest thing was balancing living space with personal and private space," says Ian. "We designed lots of little spaces – for example space to do homework, read or make meals – and the ramp joins up the spaces. Rather than hindering the design, the ramp was central to it."

The ramp's design means that if Greta is in the living room there are six different spaces that her parents can be in, and move between, where she is still able to see, hear and communicate with them. The accessibility of the house also means Greta's friends can come and play in an environment which is designed to let her play just like any other eight-year-old.

Both Greta and Beatrice were involved in the design process and the family worked with models made from wood, wool and even marzipan. Having made figures of





themselves, the children used these to visualise themselves in the house and have some active input in its design.

"They could ask to have connections between the different spaces," Ian says. "For example, between a place to read books and the kitchen. There's also a connection between our bedroom and the living space, so if Greta is unwell she can use our room and we can still see her from the living space. We have doors so we can make it private again but that's one of her favourite things." The children also helped to plan the garden.

Building confidence

Designing the house hasn't just solved problems of physical access, it's also had a very positive impact on Greta. For example, the accessible kitchen means she can now indulge in her love of baking and cooking.

"I think she's more confident," says Ian. "She's got her independence back. There's a huge difference between me carrying her up and down stairs and pushing her up the ramp in her wheelchair. If she gets the motor skills to operate an electric wheelchair she will be even more independent. It's also the little things – she can now brush her own teeth in the wet room. Before, she had to do it in her bedroom or the living room."

Ian has also noticed that Greta is doing more with Beatrice because it's easier – reading together indoors and planting seeds together



in the garden. Indeed, the whole family is doing more together: "We've always included Greta but now it's easier. When something is harder you do it less often."

Like every grand design, building the house took time and money. In a final push to get it finished the couple enlisted some extra help from people in the local area who knew Greta from her school.

"We had people laying floors, moving boxes, helping us move in and making the house a home," says Ian. "It was incredibly touching."

Ian admits that before having Greta his experience of disability was limited.

Since, she has had a big impact on his work as an architect.

"Disability creates a totally different view of the world," he says.

"It changes the way you design as an architect. You become aware what

Looking to move?

You might not be able to build your own 'grand design', but if you are looking to buy or rent an accessible property, Belinda Milrod, Housing Manager at Aspire, the charity for people with spinal cord injuries, gives the following advice:

- Phone ahead and speak to an estate agent who has seen the property that you are interested in. Make sure that you can get in to view it – ask them to measure the width of the front door and to provide a ramp if necessary. Agents are obliged to make reasonable adjustments to make any property accessible to view, but not to provide a permanent solution.
- Make sure that the provider or agency knows exactly what you are looking for. For example, don't assume that a

bungalow will be all on one floor – many are 'chalet style' and have a first floor area.

- Never purchase a house until you know that you will get permission to make all the adaptations that you need and that you can afford to make all those adaptations.
 - If you are renting a property and making adaptations, technically you will need to return the property to its original state when you leave, unless you have permission in writing from the owner.
 - If you are in danger of becoming homeless due to a lack of accessible housing, get in touch with your local authority's homeless team.
- aspire.org.uk

different people need and the things they find difficult. You try to design things so they are not problematic."

The Ramp House proves that accessibility doesn't have to mean clinical looking accessible toilets and bolt-on ramps. Ian hopes architects will go that extra mile when it comes to accessible design.

"There is a minimum legal requirement but architects can go further than that. It's up to the designer and they need to be more aware of how people operate. Architects should realise that design has to fit all of us, not just non-disabled people." ■

Useful websites

cmcmarchitects.com

On Ian and Thea's company website you'll find more information on the Ramp House, including a blog of the build.

accessible-property.org.uk

A site specialising in accessible and adapted property, for sale and to rent, plus accessible holiday accommodation.

