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Accessibility at the heart of stunning kitchen design

In 2011, Jo Wright developed a spinal epidural abscess, resulting in the loss of movement in her legs. This meant she and her husband needed to re-evaluate their living needs. They decided to build a new home that would meet their requirements and were lucky enough to get permission to construct it in their very own garden. Here, Jo talks to i-Build's Rebecca Kemp about planning a new-build home for accessibility and Keith Myers, Designer at The Myers Touch, runs through the design of the ultra-modern kitchen.

Jo Wright, homeowner
RK: In terms of accessibility and functionality, what were your must-haves for your kitchen?

JW: We wanted a kitchen that would work for all the family, enable me, as a full-time wheelchair user, to make food and access storage and look lovely in an open-plan space. My husband is a keen cook, so it had to work also for able-bodied chefs!

RK: How did you approach finalising your design brief?

JW: This was the second accessible kitchen we had commissioned, and for both, the core design was done by Adam Thomas, who is the UK's recognised expert in accessible kitchen design (www.adamthomasconsultancy.com).

He worked with the architects (www.acgarchitects.co.uk) and us to agree on the overall shape and function of the kitchen. We then worked with The Myers Touch Kitchen Design Studio to finalise the detailing, pick the materials and appliances, etc.

RK: Were there any challenging aspects to the project?

JW: There were some minor challenges blending the optimum design of an accessible kitchen (ideally U-shaped) with the architectural considerations. In particular, I wanted easy access to the outside terrace from the kitchen, which 'broke' the U shape. But, we found functional compromises, and the space looks great and works perfectly.

RK: What materials and kitchen products do you especially find helpful?

JW: The eye-level Neff hide-and-slide ovens work very well if you are a wheelchair user, and the pull-out shelves under each hot appliance are very functional (extra work surface where you need it!) and a safety feature for a seated cook.

A sink you can get your legs under is a must if you're a wheelchair user, and I am pretty proud of my funny little drawer to hide washing up cloths in!

The Dekton worktop is straightforward to maintain, and an induction hob is so easy to clean that it makes keeping the kitchen spotless very easy. Large warming drawers we also use a lot – sometimes just to hide food from naughty dogs!

RK: Are there any products you recommend to others looking to undertake an accessible kitchen project?

JW: Accessible sink and eye-level ovens (preferably hide-and-slide doors) with pull-out shelves underneath would be the priorities I'd recommend. In our first accessible kitchen, we had two electric rise-and-fall worktops, but for this one, we decided we could manage without – this saves money and also opens up the options for worktops.

RK: Did you remain within the original budget?

JW: Yes, the kitchen budget was stuck to, mainly because final costs were only done when the detailed designs were complete.

RK: What advice would you offer to anyone looking to undertake an accessible kitchen design?

JW: Contact Adam Thomas for the core layout!

Keith Myers, Designer at The Myers Touch

RK: Do you have much experience in designing accessible kitchens?

KM: We had worked with a client who commissioned us to help design a kitchen that would enable their disabled child to access and enjoy their kitchen-living space. The most important thing about designing for a disability is you have to consider the practical issues first but make it functional and look beautiful. Sometimes the default process that some customers go straight to is that they feel they need their accessible kitchen to be entirely practical, but that isn't the case as we can create a space that is not only practical but looks elegant and stylish with plenty of attractive design features.



RK: What is the most critical aspect of designing with accessibility in mind?

KM: We worked alongside the architect practice, ACG Architects, and Adam Thomas, who is an accessible kitchen design specialist, to create this space that would allow Jo to live, cook and enjoy her home independently. The design has been highly acclaimed in the press and is shortlisted for 'House of the Year' at the 2022 RIBA South Regional Awards.

We had initially received a conceptual design from Adam. From

that, we created almost two kitchens in one space – one that makes it easy for Jo to use and one that her husband and grown-up children could use in symphony. For example, we looked at the conceptual moveable worktop around the hub and sink area (a standard disability-type function in a kitchen space). Because of the size of the space, it enabled us to fix a lower-level workshop in position for Jo and another worktop for her husband and grown-up children to use when they are all in the kitchen together preparing food. ▶



RK: Did you encounter any design challenges for this project?

KM: The kitchen allows Jo to prepare, cook and serve meals for her family independently. We included wheelchair-level ovens with tray slides directly under two Neff hide-and-slide ovens, a Neff steamer and a microwave so she can hold/slide hot oven trays across each tray slide. We also incorporated a little pull-out shelf that allowed Jo to move food/trays to her worktop level.

In front of the hob, a protective lip is at the edge of the worktop to stop a pan from boiling over onto the floor or Jo's lap. The mix of SC10, S2 and SLC SieMatic cabinetry in tones of Sterling Grey and Graphite Grey allow her to clean the cabinetry easily, and the durable Dekton Keon worktops accommodate heavy-duty use whilst looking attractive.

The architects included wooden slats across the entire ground floor, creating a stunning kitchen feature. The inclusion of this wood in the kitchen did create some technical issues that had to be overcome, such as how the doors opened without clashing with each other and keeping all the gaps the same size. The other tricky bit was ensuring that the slats ran precisely over the door units because they were designed off-plan first, so we had to ensure that they wouldn't overlap over a door front. There were also small appliances (a toaster and coffee machine) and pull-out drawers behind that area requiring isolation from power, so we included isolators on the door switches so that when the doors were closed, all the appliances would automatically switch off.

The kitchen has three different heights to enable Jo and her family to prepare and cook food. The end of the peninsula and the second sink area in the slatted wall area has a standard height of 900mm, the accessible worktop with the sink is 870mm and the worktop with the hob is 820mm.

The stone sink was also custom made by Cosentino, so it isn't too deep for Jo to reach into. The waste trap was positioned right at the back rather than the centre of the sink so that Jo's knee didn't come into contact with the waste trap when sitting underneath it when she was washing up, putting dishes into the sink etc.



RK: What do you think makes this kitchen such a successful, award-winning project?

KM: We took each difficulty and turned it into a positive outcome. We worked with our suppliers to create custom solutions in a range of sizes, shapes and positions that we wanted them to be, to provide Jo and her family with a kitchen they could all enjoy together or independently.

RK: Are there any products you'd recommend to others looking to design and build an accessible kitchen?

KM: I visited Jo and her family after they had been living in the space for just under a year, and I asked: "How's it working for you?". Her answer was: "It is absolutely fabulous. Everything is in the right place. And everything works!". There is no better reward than hearing that from a client, especially as the kitchen has meant Jo feels independent again.

RK: What spatial/design advice would you offer to others looking to undertake a similar project?

KM: The first thing is to understand what their needs and desires are and who else lives in the house. Including simple things, such as cabinetry with handles that allow drawers and cupboards to easily open, changing a tap to a hot water sensor tap and modifying one of the worktop heights, are great ways of altering an existing kitchen into a more accessible space.

Also, to create a fused kitchen design that works for each family member with varying needs and heights – I am delighted to say that it's a space that allows the whole family to enjoy and create memories together.

RK: In rough figures, how much would a kitchen renovation like this cost?

KM: We would estimate a similar kitchen, including appliances, would start at around £65,000, but the design would depend on the quality of materials, devices and bespoke work that would be undertaken. ●

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