

EP: 3 The Case for Universally Designed Housing with Disability Advocate Erin Gough transcript

[00:00:00] **VIC:** When you stop to think logically about how. Important housing externally, every aspect of our lives, few people would argue against the idea that having a decent home is a fundamental human, right? Over many years, successive governments in this country have committed to implementing the right to a proper home.

[00:00:17] As it's in the international bill of rights convention on the rights of the child convention on persons with disabilities, and the United Nations declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples. However, we've signed up for these declarations on the world stage. But unfortunately, we have not put the legislation in place that would make the right to a decent home, a reality in practice.

[00:00:40] There are many reasons why this is the case. And we aim to cover them all in this podcast. So we're starting Today with a topic and a community underserved by our approach to housing. The situation has been frankly [00:01:00] inhumane to the disabled community.

[00:01:02] It also personally resonates with me. I have a progressive degenerative eye condition. That means I will be functionally blind in the future. And so I now see the lack of accessible housing in Aldo through very different eyes, pun intended, but even before the start of my journey, it was something that I knew we were doing a terrible job at as a society.

[00:01:25] That was down to Today's guest's influence. Erin Gough. Erin is a human rights lawyer. Policy expert community advocate, famous on Twitter and a dear friend of mine for 15 years as a wheelchair user, Erin's lived experience of our inaccessible housing is something we've talked about over many coffees, lunches, and dinners, and many years.

[00:01:53] Today, we decided to record that conversation for you. Welcome

[00:01:58] **Erin:** Erin. Sure, [00:02:00] Vic, thanks for having me. Great to be here.

[00:02:03] **VIC:** We'll start a new tradition on the Right at Home podcast Today. And you're our very first guest to join us in it. And we're going to ask you to describe the time when you felt most at home.

[00:02:13] So, I was thinking about this before, and I think there was quite a recent time. I've just recently bought my own home for the first time. I have a very distinct memory of coming up the ramp that your partner had newly built. And I just remember crossing the thresholds, and just having this sense of calm and, yeah, nass wash over me that I haven't felt before. And so it's been a very, a firming experience to have that housing security and to be able to know that I don't ever have to worry about moving out of home again and that I can make the space my own.

[00:02:49] **Erin:** And it's been a fun experience over the last ten months. Being able to do that. So I would say that. When I felt most of home is coming up the ramp up to my own, up to my [00:03:00] own home for the first time.

[00:03:01] **VIC:** And because it always hasn't been like that, has it, Erin? So one of the things we've talked about has been your direct experience in Wellington before finding your own home.

[00:03:13] You didn't feel so at home for so many years. I've had a lot of barriers as a wheelchair user accessing suitable housing and feeling at home. As you say, the most acute experience meant I had to shower at my workplace for about seven months.

[00:03:29] a couple of years ago. Because I couldn't access the shower where my sister and I were living, we had searched high and low for any accessible apartment or accessible enough apartment, at least, to be able to move into, and couldn't do that. The landlords of the place that I was in, again, weren't completely accessible, but it was a bit more manageable with selling their place.

[00:03:54] **Erin:** And so I had to move out. And at that point, wasn't in a position to consider buying my own home. [00:04:00] I literally couldn't shower and had to go to work when I wanted to. And I don't know that I can articulate how much of an impact I had on my life, in that period of time, in terms of the.

[00:04:14] Just the logistical impact, but also the impact on my physical and mental health at the time, how isolating that experience was. And just, yeah, having no anchor or feeling any sense of feeling at home at all was kind of a discombobulating experience. So it's a very, very welcome experience to pass past that point.

[00:04:37] **VIC:** Absolutely and Erin, you haven't always lived in this inaccessible city. you've got your experiences taken you around the country and the world. and I just. I wondered, if you could tell us what it was like, growing up and what's happened when you've traveled overseas as well, given your vast experience, in human rights and the fact that's taken you all over

[00:04:58] **Erin:** the show.

[00:04:59] Yeah, [00:05:00] indeed. So yeah, I grew up and spent the first part of my childhood in Africa. My parents immigrated here when I was eight years old. That's a whole other podcast. Um, New Zealand's immigration laws mean that I would not be able to immigrate at all. And so there's always an irony there.

[00:05:16] I feel like I've contributed a lot to umdo. I would hope but the immigration laws here are now so able that many people can't immigrate. but then moved to Christchurch and, experienced the Christchurch earthquakes there. And so that was a whole nother accessibility, experience.

[00:05:34] And, the barriers. That brought up in terms of the built environment sort of, uh, launched me into, I would say advocacy as a young university student wanting the crisis rebuild to be as accessible as it could be. And that includes housing I started getting in, involved in youth groups and.

[00:05:53] This kind of international youth advocacy has taken me to places like India, where we obviously [00:06:00] first met. Yeah, I would say, it's been an interesting experience too. Kind of experience these places because New Zealand has held up as such a, pinnacle of human rights and on one level, if you're comparing, Wellington with new Del, then like short, but I'm not sure that's actually, the most helpful thing to do sometimes because it means that people can just, You know, say, at least we're not only jelly and at least, you know, you can get around the city somewhat.

[00:06:26] it's been an interesting journey. having both lived in another city and, done a bit of traveling through my advocacy. Yeah, for sure.

[00:06:33] **VIC:** So let's get stuck into that conversation. And I wanna go back to your point about irony because, you have worked, in. Human rights for I'm gonna.

[00:06:44] Pretty much since we met so 15 years that I've known and perhaps longer, including at the human rights commission, the office of the children's commissioner, the ministry for education. And now you are involved in setting up the new ministry for

[00:07:00] disabled people, which is just launched. that's really, you know, exciting and,

[00:07:05] The contribution you have made is. Immense actually. So why do you think it is that we've got away with not having a human right to housing in our legislation or indeed not having some baseline measures for accessibility in our housing system hi on this a lot. And it's, I think it's a number of things.

[00:07:28] **Erin:** I think, as a culture, we pride ourselves as, being a number eight wire. We'll just knock some things up. We don't need to make rules. We'll just see how it goes and she'll be right. I think that attitude means that we don't have the policy and legislative frameworks or the, or the political world to regulate things to the same extent that some other countries do on one hand that provides some flexibility.

[00:07:52] but I think when it comes to things like accessibility and particularly around housing, if you don't have that strong [00:08:00] foundation pun intended, then it's always gonna be, A matter of who has the most resources, to make things happen.

[00:08:07] **Erin:** And who has the most will to do so. And if, you're not the flavor of the month, which disabled people generally aren't, unfortunately, then, you miss out. And so I think that's just, the reality of our kind of. The country's culture and our political system does not want to rock the boat and make too many rules.

[00:08:27] And it has these implications, that we're gonna be talking about.

[00:08:30] Do you think we've made any progress in the 15 years you've worked on this topic?

[00:08:35] **Erin:** I would kinda like to. So because it, it gets very, uh, very demotivating sometimes. Otherwise, you know, you kind of get into this head space where you like, why Boba.

[00:08:45] when I go back to crisis now, for example, I think about what the city used to be like before the earthquakes, when I was in my first year of uni. And then I now go back and I can roll around the new, Avon River precinct and get [00:09:00] into all the businesses there. And, really don't have to worry about accessibility in that kind of CBD area.

[00:09:07] **Erin:** I do think that there has been on like that individual, like regional level, some progress made, obviously not ideal that the entire. CBD had to be rebuilt to make that happen. unfortunately, I don't think that the opportunity was taken as far as it could be in terms of like the residential housing that crash has built since the earthquakes.

[00:09:27] But I think there are like pockets of hope that I very tightly to, because otherwise it, it becomes a bit overwhelming.

[00:09:36] **VIC:** So building on that hope. What do you think that entities like community housing old here, or others can do to advocate for the logical next step? What do you think that is?

[00:09:49] **Erin:** Yeah, I think, entities like community housing are play a key role in being the voice of advocacy of, being the critical friend that the government and others [00:10:00] need, set the vision for what we want our. Our society to, to be like in regard to housing and to, I guess be a unifying force, bringing all the different providers, together and trying to paint that, that picture, that we're of that vision that we're trying to get to, where we all have safe, decent, accessible housing, where we can choose where we live, who we live with, how we live.

[00:10:24] And I think this new ministry as well, I. It has a huge opportunity to have good outcomes for the sales people, but it's part of. housing is going to be a huge issue and that you can't expect anyone who works there who's disabled to up and move to Wellington because there's literally no housing there.

[00:10:44] you're going to work around that in different ways. You're gonna have to think about remote working opportunities. However, I think at the moment, we have still taken a narrower view and, I think [00:11:00] organizations like community housing help us make it a more expensive view of those kinds of things.

[00:11:05] **VIC:** I really wanna hone in on that idea of expensive view and choice. One of the things you just said was the way, you know, you talked about the ways in which we just,

we limit ourselves to what we know. and you also talked about our number eight wire culture you and I have talked a lot about what choices and what expense of her horizons.

[00:11:26] Universally designed homes can open up, not just for you as a wheelchair user, but for the likes of me, as well as my eyesight declines, and I'm gonna have more need for visual aids in my home. And that universal design as a concept can open up choice for a range of different needs within a home and the choice for people to age in place as well.

[00:11:50] So I wondered if you could just. Tell us a little bit more about your view of universal design as a concept, and what impact you think that it might have if we were to [00:12:00] say have it in our building code

[00:12:03] **Erin:** yeah. I think people have this view that accessible housing means that you like. Have to knock up a few ugly gray barrels in the bathroom so that people can, you know, people who need those things can access them.

[00:12:14] But when you think about universal design, it's designing the space so that the maximum of people possible can use it to the maximum extent. So that means even down to simple things like, the door with, for example, why can't we as a standard have doors that wheelchair users can reach.

[00:12:34] why can't we have flat entrances as a standard, where it's possible? It could be through the internal garage. Why, for instance, do we have to put our.

[00:12:52] **Erin:** Plugs, super low. Why can't we just have them midway up the wall at an easier height for everyone. It's just, it's really little [00:13:00] things, but it makes a really big difference. And it means that you can also build on those things. So if I. Came to universally-designed home. There might be some specialist things that I still need to install, but the foundations are there so that I don't have to worry about making huge renovations, just to get around and get in and out of my house and yeah.

[00:13:24] get in the door. so I think universal design. There's a huge potential for it. I don't think it's well understood. And I think people. And systems still very much think in kind of a short term way. So it's not about investing for our future. It's not about recognizing that once you build a house, it's gonna be there for 50, 60, 70 years.

[00:13:49] **Erin:** And so if you build it in a way that's inaccessible for a whole. Range of people then, like you say, there might be conditions that develop over time. People might just get [00:14:00] older. people might have children and have some access needs during that period of their life. And so universal design just makes it easier to navigate all those different things, look across our lifetimes, and take a real.

[00:14:16] long term kind of investment approach to these issues.

[00:14:19] **VIC:** And that short term versus long term thing comes up a lot. Doesn't it. When we talk about the upfront cost of universal design, we've seen anywhere from 10 to 20% front loading of cost to build to universal design specifications. Builders and developers often use that as a reason to say.

[00:14:41] If we want these homes to be affordable, we simply can't be putting in these extra design features. what would you say to that? You could make the argument, but it's a very short-term view. If the cases that you need to retrofit something later on, because you suddenly need the accessibility, then [00:15:00] it's gonna cost way more than 10 to 20%.

[00:15:02] **Erin:** So you may as well spend the money at the start and it, and if it more as an investment, rather than a cost, right? And because if you make your. block of apartments that you're building. If you put a decent amount of universal designs homes in there, it opens it up to a lot of people who might not have considered that option.

[00:15:27] So you're also like, expanding your market in a sense, if you wanna put it that way. I don't particularly like those kinds of arguments because. It's very buy into the kind of

neoliberal, like capitalist ways of viewing things. But if that's how you want to view it, it could also be like investment potential.

[00:15:43] **VIC:** And in the human rights world, we talk a lot about commoditization of housing and the impact that's had on a whole bunch of things, including affordability and accessibility. And so your. Position there that actually viewing a home [00:16:00] as a long term, you know, societal good versus an individual, asset has a lot of resonance because when you view it through that lens and take out the commodity of the home, you actually see that universal design actually makes a whole bunch of senses because if you want something to be around.

[00:16:19] For a hundred years instead of 10, you look at it through a really different window. You look at it in a long term sense and at it in terms of multiple. As you pointed out, families and households in that home will have a range of different needs from the home. So certainly that's a really strong case for why they're having the human right to a decent home enabled in our legislation would lock in different types of opportunities for everybody to have a home that meets their needs.

[00:16:51] So you raised a really good point there, and I know that. The financialization of the housing system is something that, the human rights commission has turned their minds to [00:17:00] in their, housing inquiry. And it is something that we discuss a lot here at community housing alter as well. do you think that as a society, we actually understand the scale of the need for accessible.

[00:17:12] I've thought about this a lot too, and it's been quite interesting because I'm, I've been in quite a unique position where people make an assumption that because I have accessibility needs that I can access social housing, but actually because I'm privileged enough to have a decent paying job and, to.

[00:17:31] **Erin:** Yeah. Be able to, you know, have saved for a deposit for a house over the years. I actually can't access social housing at all. And so there's a real policy gap where people either have to choose decent paying employment with the hope that. They can save enough of a deposit or in my case. find someone to buy a house with because of Wellington's astronomical housing prices or, have the potential to access social housing, and stay on a benefit.

[00:17:58] Really. So [00:18:00] being forced to live in poverty, essentially to be able to guarantee the access to an accessible home. And so the scale of need, I think, is really invisible because of. I've seen stats that say that 2% of New Zealand's housing stock is accessible, but again, that's a rough estimate because we don't have good data on those things.

[00:18:24] If we look at the last disability survey, which was done almost 10 years ago in 2013, at least one in four new Zealanders identified disabled. And even if you take the view no all people need, accessibility in terms of housing, there's a massive, potential gap between the 2% of housing that is supposedly accessible.

[00:18:46] So I think the scale of need is very unknown at this point.

[00:18:49] I'm really interested if you have thoughts on what.

[00:18:53] **VIC:** What we might need to do to fill that policy gap. I know for example, in Australia, they have a national insurance scheme [00:19:00] that funds accessible housing. Specifically. We don't have an equivalent here in Aldo, and I know for our members that provide specialists or accessible housing, they effectively have to get money from a bunch of different funds for, you know, non-specialist support services and make it.

[00:19:19] Do you think there's an opportunity to have a centralized funding approach to accessible housing? Or do you think there are other policy options we should look for from overseas?

[00:19:30] The Australian example is also really interesting, cause I don't know exactly the detail, but I'm pretty sure they also now have, something in their building code that says that there's a minimum amount of new access of new builds that have to be accessible as well.

[00:19:45] **Erin:** So they've got some backing. And so I think Having that this base is really important, cuz then you can build the policy kind of options, from there as well. But I think, yeah, taking a more centralized view and this binary of social housing [00:20:00] versus the private market, getting rid of that binary and just looking at what people actually need.

[00:20:04] that should be the first question. If you need accessible housing, then. It shouldn't matter. Essentially, what you earn might affect what you can afford to pay and rent, but your actual access to that should be a given. And that should be based on essentially what you need.

[00:20:21] **Erin:** So I think there's a, a, reframe there that, we are missing at the moment. There's an opportunity to think about, yeah, the private versus. I think social housing, binary and how we overcome, overcome that as well, is really interesting.

[00:20:35] And you've talked about the way that you've entered into the private market, which is through co-living or having a mortgage partner

[00:20:43] **VIC:** Yeah. And I wonder if you could tell us a little about your experience of that, because certainly that's something that more and more people are looking towards and whether or not you feel like that's something that should be supported more to the benefit of the disabled community.

[00:20:58] **Erin:** Yeah. I mean, again, [00:21:00] I cannot express how much, luck I have had to land myself in this situation.

[00:21:05] I managed to meet someone at work that was game enough to, make a huge financial investment. And, put her life savings into a house with me. I don't think people generally have that experience. and so I know that I am a very, a rare, rare case in that regard. but I would say that. One of the things we were talking about last night was when we were looking for a house together, only two banks would consider lending to us because everyone else was like, oh, you're not in a traditional partnership.

[00:21:35] For some reason that's seen is a risk. and so we only had two options, to go with. And I think again, there needs to be a more expensive view taken of, the kind of. structures that people can buy housing through. The two kids in the Y picket fence are not the nuclear family anymore. There's legitimate co-living [00:22:00] structures. There's a great opportunity to think about centralizing this old-fashioned view of what makes a family and what makes a home and who gets access to that?

[00:22:10] **VIC:** You raise a really good point. We've talked a lot about the government and the government's role. And of course the government has a huge role to play in the housing system. But we haven't talked much about the banks yet. And I wonder if you had any other comment there on the role.

[00:22:29] Finance, in terms of accessible housing and how we have limited ourselves in terms of our financial system, as you rightly just pointed out to what is a home and who should be in it, I don't know the ins and outs of our finance stuff, numbers. Aren't my strong point, but I think there is an opportunity to. rather than being criteria-based, as you know, mortgages are very much these days to again, have flexibility [00:23:00] to take different people's needs into account.

[00:23:04] **Erin:** And to, again, the first question I think should be what should people need and to go from there rather than go through a arbitrary list of criteria and, And have it driven that way. So I think there's an opportunity there, and a role for the banks and companies that take up these kinds of spaces to think about their role as well.

[00:23:30] It was wonderful to hear that your experience of being most at home was in your own home, that you were recently able to buy Erin. But I know that process was certainly not smooth sailing for you. And I just wondered if you could give us an overview of what it was like to look for a house that met your needs and budget. Yeah. it was an experience, I think, har and I, the person that I bought house with, if we weren't [00:24:00] gonna become firm friends and have a 30 year mortgage together, there was no better experience than finding. So try to look for a house, give a, I would describe it as, how would I describe it?

[00:24:12] I would describe it as trying to find a needle in a haystack, and somehow we found the needle in the haystack. So the house that I live in now, the only thing we really had to do to make it accessible was to put a ramp in at the front door. The bathroom is already renovated. So I can use that, easily.

[00:24:27] It's got an accessible shower. There's a low bench up in the kitchen, which is good for me to access in terms of cooking. So there was nothing integral that we needed to change for me to be able to access the house about in looking for that.

[00:24:42] We probably went to. I don't know, maybe 20 different viewings and none of those were Remotely suitable. So we would turn up to places and we'd already be thinking, well, I could get in this way. But, Harry was having to [00:25:00] haul me up some steps to even get into the door. Then there would be a narrow hallway, for example.

[00:25:05] We were already thinking about the turning circle being big enough for me to be able to turn around, are we gonna have to renovate, the inside of the house before you even move in for me to be able to. get around. we would also have to deal with real estate agents. that's a whole nother, probably, podcast who had made assumptions about the accessibility of the house before we turned up that were inaccurate.

[00:25:28] So we spent quite a bit of time going to viewings that we might not have gone to if we knew what the access would be like. And I don't think that they were trying to. Trying to kind of, oversell things to us. I just think people's awareness of what accessibility actually is and what accessibility means is pretty low.

[00:25:49] but yeah, I would say it was a pretty. depressing experience and it's something that I expected to be depressing. but it didn't make it any easier, to [00:26:00] go through. I would say that we got extremely lucky, extremely fast. We thought that it might take six months to a year to find a place we were in for the long haul, but we only had to house hunt for maybe.

[00:26:14] **Erin:** Two and a half months. So we just struck gold at the right time. We ended up coming to this place because it had an asking price, which was very rare for Wellington. It had been on the market for a few weeks at that point. And they decided to put an asking price on it. So we knew how much they were looking for.

[00:26:31] And then we managed to charm the agent enough that he would, let us be the first people to put an offer in on it, which given that we were with quite a large group of people was an achievement in itself. So several things just fell into place. So that meant we could, put in an accepted offer. But to get to that point, was indeed a journey.

[00:26:54] **VIC:** And I think the point that raises there. Fantastic that you found that [00:27:00] needle in the haystack, but that accessible housing should be the haystack. But it shouldn't take fate and, you know, a nice real estate agent and a particular time in the housing market and the one house that had an asking price, to enable you to find a home where you feel at home.

[00:27:23] It was like the ladies of laies like, that's the way that I describe it and that, that shouldn't be. that shouldn't be an experience that someone has to have. You should just be able to, know that if you need accessible housing, there's a straightforward pathway to get you there.

[00:27:37] as a wheelchair user, like people, I'm the quintessential, like what people think about when they think of disability. So it's very easy for them to say, okay, that person needs a ramp to get in the door.

[00:27:47] **Erin:** But the point is that's not always that obvious and people have a range of access needs that might not be as visible. And we should be able to build for those things as well. Like I have, friends with autism, [00:28:00] for example, who need like certain lighting and you know, certain acoustics and all those kinds of things.

[00:28:05] And people don't even start thinking about that. my reflection on scene and unseen disability is that you are right in our mind's eye.

[00:28:16] **VIC:** We think of accessibility in the same way that I think we think of homelessness: homelessness is about the single man who's sleeping. Rough. Who has mental health and addiction issues that's this, the, this common perception of what homelessness is. And so people think about accessible housing and someone needing a ramp or inaccessible bathroom, as you just pointed out their air and.

[00:28:44] I think that backs us into a corner around how we think of design and design services for people. And it backs us into a corner regarding our understanding of the scale of the [00:29:00] need. Because if we were to talk about homelessness as housing insecurity, then you start quantifying all of the people living in garages.

[00:29:10] All people in emergency accommodation, all of the people living in a home that they feel unsafe in, even if it is a secure roof over their heads. And I think the same thing goes for accessibility. If we think about the range of. Of accessibility needs that are out there. Then we start understanding how much we failed in terms of accessible housing as well.

[00:29:36] And we start quantifying the scale of the need. And I know you and I on a personal note when I, first diagnosed with my condition, had this conversation where I think I was quite body slammed by this sudden change that had happened in my life. Where we talked about this, that there, you know, people won't know that I have an [00:30:00] accessibility need for a very long time.

[00:30:02] That comes with pros and cons. We need to acknowledge that that's about things happening over time. And it's also about the full range of needs out there regarding how our homes nourish and support us.

[00:30:18] **Erin:** Absolutely.

[00:30:19] There's a whole discussion about people's fear of disability. How it backs us into a corner in terms of, you know, not designing for these things, because the reason is because people are so scared of this, fate, worse and death of becoming disabled, that we don't think about it as, as something that is part of the human experience.

[00:30:39] And it eventually will affect the vast majority of us. If we're lucky enough to age that far.

[00:30:46]