The Power of the Built Environment in the Context of Sustainability
Esther Greenhouse

Abstract:
Significant demographic and societal trends are shaping the way we live. Green building and sustainability cannot be fully realized without an understanding of the larger context and interconnectedness of a variety of issues. Builders and architects, zoning officials and planners, as well as policy makers must have an understanding of how design on every level impacts our nation’s well-being within micro and macro contexts.

The built environment impacts our functioning, wellness, and degree of independence regardless of how it is designed. If thoughtfully designed based on practical information and research findings, mankind has the ability to enable independence and increase health. If not, the environment provides obstacles which not only prevent us from functioning properly today, but actually encourage the decline of our abilities over time. This is true on the micro scale of product design (think lever door handles and OXO Good Grips kitchen tools), to the design of homes and public spaces (think zero-step entries and Visitable homes), to the macro scale of neighborhoods and communities (walkability, mixed-use zoning, privacy, and informal public interaction). Products, housing, and communities which are green are not truly sustainable unless they can meet the needs of a variety of users today and over the lifespan.

Also considered are larger societal trends and movements such as: zoning, the development of the interstate highway system, family structures, longevity, and how they have impacted our health and our ability to age in place.

Bio:
Nationally recognized as an expert in Universal Design and Aging in Place, Esther Greenhouse is an environmental gerontologist: a professional who specializes in how the built environment affects the functioning and well-being of older adults. A former interior designer, Ms. Greenhouse has worked as a researcher and lecturer at Cornell University, teaching Accessibility, Universal Design, Design for Seniors, and Design for Alzheimer’s Disease. Dedicated to enabling seniors to successfully age in place, she teaches CAPS classes to make this a reality. Ms. Greenhouse’s passion for teaching CAPS and Aging in Place advocacy resulted in her receiving NAHB’s CAPS of the Year in 2008.

Ms. Greenhouse holds memberships in the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB), the American Planning Association (APA), and the Environmental Design and Research Association (EDRA). At the request of Dr. Bill Thomas, she consulted on the nation’s first elder-focused emergency department.

Ms. Greenhouse was invited by the NYS Office for Aging (NYSOFA) to write portions of the Livable NY Resource Manual, as well as by Stanford University on the book, ‘Planning to Stay: New Visions for Aging in Place’, under the leadership of the Honorable Henry Cisneros. Ms. Greenhouse is serving by invitation on two national Universal Design Coalitions, including AARP/The Boomer Project’s Universal Design Consumer Task Force. She is currently developing a webinar on Universal Design, Aging in Place, and related issues for building, planning, and zoning professionals, as well as a series on enabling housing for public television with The Albany Guardian Society. Ms. Greenhouse views these projects as opportunities to create positive change whereby society makes enabling housing a reality.