

HOMES & CONSTRUCTION

'I REDESIGNED OUR HOME FOR MY BLIND DAUGHTER'

PHOTOS BY UMAR NSUBUGA

BY UMAR NSUBUGA

When my daughter Shanaz Nsubuga was born, she had a slight disability in her eyes. When she turned two, I noticed that she had limited sight. But after her fourth eye operation, she became completely blind.

That was when reality hit hard. She started bumping into walls, sharp corners and furniture. Long corridors, steps and stylish, but confusing layouts – turned into daily hazards.

What I once admired as good architecture had become dangerous. During that time, my thoughts revolved around one thing only – her life. I focused on medical care, therapy, and emotional support, never imagining that the house we lived in could stand in her way.

I believed love, patience and treatment were enough. I later learned that love must also be built into space.

Every Sunday, I hired an occupational therapist to help Nsubuga adapt to daily living. On his first visit, he said Nsubuga needed her own specially designed toilet. At the time, we were living in my first house I had built as a young man. I thought a few minor adjustments would solve everything.

When Nsubuga turned three, I had already completed a bigger house and we moved in believing more space would mean more comfort. But when the occupational therapist visited the new house, he delivered another shock. The house itself, he said, needed redesigning. I ignored the advice. After all, I had just invested heavily in construction.

I finally consulted an architect and explained my daughter's condition. His response was firm and clear: The house had to be redesigned.

It had to enable simpler movement, have fewer obstacles, safer finishes and predictable layouts.

It was painful to accept. Redesigning a house is expensive, and raising a child with special needs already stretches every

>>
I BELIEVED LOVE, PATIENCE AND TREATMENT WERE ENOUGH. I LATER LEARNED THAT LOVE MUST ALSO BE BUILT INTO SPACE.

resource. But love leaves you no choice. That experience opened my eyes to a wider truth, disability is not only about the body, it is also about the environment.

ACCESS AND MOVEMENT
Muhammad Nsereko, a construction expert, explains that access is the foundation of inclusive design. "If the resident uses a wheelchair, a ramp is not optional, it is essential," he says.

Ramps should not be steep and must be constructed using non-slip materials. They should also include landings at both the top and bottom to allow rest and stability.

"For people who walk with difficulty or use walking sticks, handrails and grab bars at steps are critical," Nsereko adds.

DOORWAYS, SWITCHES
Nsereko notes that narrow doorways are one of the biggest

barriers in a number of homes. "Doorways should be wide enough to allow wheelchairs go through comfortably, about 34 to 36 inches," he explains. He adds that locks, switches, plugs and alarm systems should be placed within easy reach, between three and four feet from the floor, so



Shanaz Nsubuga washing clothes. The home she lives in had to be redesigned to enable movement



Access is the foundation of inclusive design. If the resident uses a wheelchair, a ramp is not optional, it is essential

residents do not struggle or rely on help.

According to Abdu-Wahab Nyanzi, an architect, designing for people with disabilities should begin at the concept stage, not as an afterthought.

"A good design should allow a person to move independently, safely and confidently within their home," he explains.

He emphasises open layouts, minimal corridors, gentle transitions between spaces and clear circulation paths, especially for the visually impaired.

For people who are blind, Nyanzi advises predictable layouts where rooms follow a logical sequence. "Once a person memorises their environment, consistency becomes their safety," he says. Sudden changes in floor levels, protruding walls, or decorative obstacles should be avoided.

KITCHEN

Nyanzi an architect explains that kitchens should be designed for usability, not height alone. Cabinets should be lower, around 30 inches and clearance between counters should be at least 40 inches for wheelchair users.

"Removing base cabinet doors allows wheelchair users to roll closer to counters," he says. Pull-out cutting boards and adjustable shelves also make food preparation easier.

At sink areas, exposed hot water pipes should be insulated to prevent burns.

Placement of utensils, food storage and appliances must be carefully planned so that daily tasks remain simple and safe.

WHEN SPECIAL NEEDS DETERMINE A HOME'S DESIGN

Michael Gitta, an interior designer, says bathrooms are the most sensitive and risky spaces in any home designed for individuals with special needs. "A rolling shower with a hand-held attachment is ideal," he explains. For those who prefer bathtubs, properly fixed grab bars are essential. They must support significant weight and be firmly fixed into studs or reinforced walls," Gitta advises. He also recommends non-slip floors, open shower spaces and easy-to-reach controls. Counter-top-style sinks provide both support and accessible storage. Where standard sinks are used, additional reinforcement underneath is critical to prevent accidents. Toilets should have grab bars on at least one side, or L-shaped bars fixed into the floor and back wall. An elevated toilet seat can significantly improve comfort and independence.



Bathrooms must have properly fixed grab bars