

Are Wheelchair Spaces Required at Bars?

The intent for the seating requirements is equal access to services. Bar-type seating is often provided in restaurants, bars and ice cream parlors. A standard bar height is about 42 inches. Is a portion of the bar required to be cut down to a height below 34 inches to provide accessible seating?

If the bar is the only seating, or the bar is in a separate area, a portion of the bar is required to be lowered to provide accessible seating. However, if the bar is part of the general dining area, or if other seating is provided in the bar area, a portion of the bar is not required to be lowered.

This applies whether seating is fixed or loose, as clarified in the 2012 IBC codes, Section 1108.2.

Let's run through some examples so the logic is more apparent. For this article, we will assume we are talking about a single-story restaurant that has an accessible route throughout in accordance with IBC, Section

*“Pull up a chair. Take a taste.
Come join us.
Life is so endlessly delicious.”*

—Ruth Reichl

By Kimberly Paarlberg, RA, Senior Architect,
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1108.2.9. The relevant IBC text is the following:

IBC

1108.2.9.1 Dining surfaces. Where dining surfaces for the consumption of food or drink are provided, at least 5 percent, but not less than one, of the dining surfaces for the seating and standing spaces shall be *accessible* and be distributed throughout the facility and located on a level accessed by an *accessible route*.

Think about the variety of restaurants out there—from fine dining, to different ethnic restaurants, burger joints, ice cream parlors, to your favorite local family restaurant. Different types of eating and drinking facilities have different kinds of seating, including tables, booths, banquets and bars.

One of the new trends in many restaurants is bar-height tables. Some fast food restaurants or delis may provide only a stand-up counter to eat at. A designer would count all the spaces set up for dining or drinking—both where seats are provided and where people were expected to stand. Based on that number, 5 percent of those spaces must be on an accessible route, and the surface must be at an accessible height, with knee and toe clearances.

Wheelchair spaces must be dispersed throughout the facility. While a whole table might be at an accessible height, only one wheelchair space would be at a table. That allows for the other seats to be located so that only the minimum egress widths are required behind the non-accessible seats, and only the wheelchair space is accessed by a 36-inch wide route.

The circulation of serving staff and other diners throughout the dining area also may be part of the design considerations. You would not want to locate a wheelchair space where someone would be bumped into by others

passing. The wheelchair spaces should not overlap the required aisles, but they can overlap the aisle access ways. This is the same intent expressed in the assembly seating arrangements for theaters and sports venues.

One of the reasons wheelchair spaces are not dispersed by type is the effect accessibility requirements would have on a type. For example, if you had bar-height tables and lowered some to get the 34-inch maximum height dining surfaces (ICC A117.1 Section 902.4), you no longer had a bar-height table, you have a standard height table. If you had booths, and pulled off one side to allow for wheelchair spaces, you now have a banquette seating. Each time you apply the accessibility requirements, you create another type of seating—the result being that a designer could never provide wheelchair spaces at all types.

There also have been practical issues with cutting down a portion of a bar. If you cut down just one wheelchair space, the person sitting there is much lower than their friend sitting next to them. What happens operationally is that the cut-down portion is often used for the cash register, the pick-up window, or by the waitresses coming to pick up orders at the bar, so the space was not available.

Older editions of the A117.1 and the 1991 ADAAG had a requirement to cut down a 60-inch-long portion, so you could have someone sit next to a person using a wheelchair at the bar. Both documents have since dropped that requirement in favor of providing seating nearby. Tables nearby allowed for more friends to sit together comfortably, and have a much greater chance of being readily available.

Coffee houses might provide tables at coffee table height. Cafés may provide only small bistro tables. Some bars and sports facilities provide only drink rails. The

Accessible portion used as cash register and pick-up window.



Accessible portions partially located behind the back of the bar and not incorporated with the rest of the seating.



Isolated wheelchair space and actual counter way below reach and direct communication with the service staff.



Are Wheelchair Spaces Required at Bars? *continued*

2009 ICC A117.1 has exceptions intended to allow for these types of dining or drinking surfaces to provide for wheelchair access by a clear floor space being adjacent, and not requiring knee and toe clearance. This allows for equal access to the dining and drinking surfaces, and at the same time, does not require the restaurant to provide a type of dining or drinking surface other than what they provide for other customers. The text is as follows:

2009 ICC A117.1

902.2 Clear Floor Space. A clear floor space complying with Section 305, positioned for a forward approach, shall be provided. Knee and toe clearance complying with Section 306 shall be provided.

EXCEPTIONS:

1. At drink surfaces 12 inches (305 mm) or less in depth, knee and toe space shall not be required to extend beneath the surface beyond the depth of the drink surface provided.
2. Dining surfaces that are 15 inches (380 mm) minimum and 24 inches (610 mm) maximum in height are permitted to have a clear floor space complying with Section 305 positioned for a parallel approach.

The intent is to provide equal access to services for everyone. The assumption in the codes is that if other types of seating are provided adjacent to the bar, services provided at the bar also will be available at the adjacent seating. If the restaurant does not offer that, they can fix that operationally.

If someone wants to provide wheelchair spaces at a bar/counter seating, there are design options that seem to work well. To the right are a couple of examples I have found in my travels I think meet the intent of equal access. **BSJO**



Top Image:
Portion on high table
incorporated with multiple
spaces at table height.

Bottom Left Image:
Stand-up counter with
two-person space
incorporated.

Bottom Right Image:
High counter seating on
back half of seating, with
front portion a height
for wheelchair use.



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