

O Romeo, Romeo! Accessibility Requirements for Balconies

Let's consider famous balcony scenes and the important parts they play in the stories. Who hasn't seen the famous balcony scene in Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet?" Cyrano and Christian under Roxane's balcony in "Cyrano de Bergerac?" Aladdin taking Jasmin from her balcony for a magic carpet ride? Or Alan and Denny drinking scotch or smoking cigars on the balcony at the end of "Boston Legal?"

Now, how would those balconies have changed if they were required to be accessible?

Balconies available for employees or public spaces are required to be accessible the same as any other room or space (IBC 1104.3). Balconies that may lead to the primary entrances of Accessible, Type A or Type B units must meet all the same accessible route requirements as

Romeo (Nate Santana) and Juliet (Emma Ladji) in the Chicago Shakespeare in the Parks production of Shakespeare's timeless classic *Romeo and Juliet*, adapted and directed by Marti Lyons.

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shared or public spaces (IBC 1107.3, 1107.4). However, there are some allowances for private balconies provided for Accessible units, Type A units and Type B units. Hotels and apartments often have private balconies.

Let's first discuss balconies within Accessible units or Type A units. Accessible units and Type A units both require a turning space within each room (ICC 1002.3.2, 1003.3.2). Balconies are not considered a room, so a turning space is not required on the balcony. Doors to the balconies can be side-swinging or sliding doors. Whichever type is chosen, the clear opening width must be 32" minimum (IBC 1010.1.1, ICC 404.2.2, 1002.5, 1003.5). Maneuvering clearance is required on both side of the doors (ICC 404.2.3.2, 404.2.3.3); however, there is an allowance to skip the maneuvering clearance on the outside if the balcony is not large enough to provide that maneuvering clearance (ICC 1002.5, Exp. 6, 1003.5, Exp. 6).

In other words, the balconies for Accessible units or Type A units are not required to be enlarged to provide either a turning space or maneuvering clearances. They can stay the same size as the balconies provided in other units in the building (see Figure 1).

Balconies can be sloped to drain (IBC 1010.1.5, ICC 404.2.3.1).

If a side-swinging door is chosen for access to the balcony, the bottom 10" shall be smooth so someone can use their footplates to push open the door and slide through (ICC 404.2.9). The difference between the inside floor surface and the outside floor surface can be ½" maximum (IBC 1010.1.5, Exp. 4). The maximum threshold on top of the inside floor surface is ½" for swinging doors and ¾" for sliding doors (IBC 1010.1.7,



Figure 1—Example of balcony with no maneuvering clearance on the outside.



Figure 2—Example of Juliet Balcony

ICC 404.2.4, 1002.5, 1003.5). This change in elevation shall be beveled (ICC 303).

Whichever hardware is chosen, its shape must be easy to grasp with one hand without tight grasping, pinching or twisting the wrist to operate (IBC 1010.1.9.1, ICC 404.2.6). On an exterior swinging door, that is probably going to be level hardware. Any locks also would be required to be within 34" and 48" above the floor (IBC 1010.1.9.2, ICC 404.2.6). This is not intended to prohibit paddle-type "thumb turns" that allow someone to use the side of their hand or knuckle to operate. Exterior doors do not have a requirement for an opening force (ICC 404.2.8).

In a Type B unit, a turning space is not required anywhere within the unit, and doors within the unit are not required to have maneuvering clearances. The balconies can be any size. The minimum clear width of the door is 31¾" instead of 32" (IBC 1010.1.1 Exp. 8, ICC 1004.5.2). The difference in elevation between the inside and outside floor surface is 4 inches maximum (IBC 1010.1.5 Exp. 5, ICC 1004.4.2, Exception). The maximum threshold allowances are the same as the Accessible and Type A units (ICC 1004.5.2.2). Within Type B units, there are no requirements for type-of-door hardware. The door hardware and locks must be within 34" and 48" above the floor (IBC 1010.1.9.2).

Now back to the "Romeo and Juliet" balcony where we started. A "Juliet balcony" is an architectural term to describe a false balcony or railing at the outer plane of a window opening reaching to the floor and having, when the window is open, the appearance of a balcony. If a designer chooses to provide a Juliet balcony, the doors are not intended for user passage, and all the requirements we just covered go away. (See Figure 2). **BSJO**