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The concept of visitability is gaining greater notice across the world. Visitability aims to inspire a new way of building homes – new homes that offer greater accommodation for all residents, including those with particular access requirements, now, and in the future. The following article, written by Youn-Young Park of the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, explains further and provides us with a case study to demonstrate the benefits.

by Youn-Young Park Ph D, Senior Researcher and Project Manager, Canadian Centre on Disability Studies

Visitability is:

'an affordable, sustainable and inclusive design approach for integrating basic accessibility features into all newly built homes and housing'

Truesdale and Steinfeld

Essential characteristics of visitable housing are associated with some basic accessibility features on the main floor, which provide easy access, not only

for the residents but also those who visit them. Different people and initiatives adopt slightly different definitions of visitability features.

Common visitability features include:

- one level, step-free entrance (at the front, back or side of the house)
- wider doorways and clear passage(s) on the main floor
- a wheelchair accessible bathroom on the main floor

Visitable housing

Visitable housing was first introduced in consideration of people with mobility issues. However, the concept is now widely accepted as a desirable home design for a wide range of residents and visitors.

In Canada, visitable housing is not well understood, nor is it widely adopted by homebuyers, housing professionals (such as, land developers, homebuilders, architects, home sales agents), and policy makers. The Bridgwater project is a unique housing development initiative in Canada in that it incorporates visitable housing as one of its key features. The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) conducted a case study of the Bridgwater project to obtain an in-depth understanding of visitable housing in a Canadian context. The case study involved interviews with stakeholders and a residents' survey. The stakeholder interviews examined perceptions and experience with visitable housing. The survey sought feedback about residents' experience with visitable homes. A total of 21 stakeholders participated in the interviews (six homeowners / residents, three policy makers, three building and development consultants, six homebuilders, and three home sales agents). A total of 41 residents (out of over 200 occupied houses) participated.

The Bridgwater project

In 2006, the province of Manitoba, as developer, launched the Bridgwater project in Winnipeg, Manitoba with plans to complete it by 2021. The project involves a town centre and three residential neighbourhoods:

- Bridgwater Forest
- Bridgwater Lakes
- Bridgwater Trails

Bridgwater Forest was the first neighbourhood developed in the project, and the development of Bridgwater Lakes (including the Bridgwater Centre) has already started. Bridgwater Trails is yet to be developed. The project will include over 1,000 visitable houses and hundreds of multi-family units with visitability features. At Bridgwater Forest and Bridgwater Lakes, over 200 visitable houses have already been built and are occupied.

BRIDGEWATER NEIGHBOURHOODS DRAFT PLAN USE

JUNE 5TH 2013





An example of a real walkway system in one of the neighbourhoods

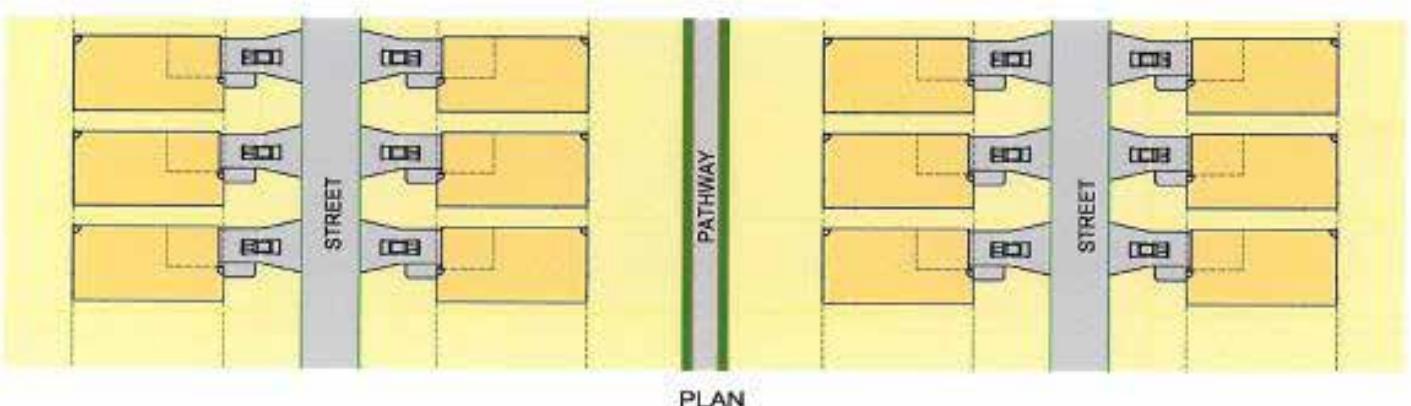


These photos show homes with a non-walkout design, and one with a walkout, providing access from the basement

Visitable Lots



PROFILE



This plan shows the walkway and street layout

Visitable housing

One of the most unique aspects of the Bridgwater project is that lots are graded in ways that are amenable to building visitable houses. The project used split levels, which makes constructing a step-free entrance to the front door easier, while allowing drainage to the pathway in the back of the house.

Visitable houses in the Bridgwater neighbourhoods are one of two types:

- non-walkout / lookout design
- walkout / lookout design

The walkout design allows entering / exiting through the basement into the back yard. The lookout design has large windows rather than exit doors in the basement.

Benefits of Visitable housing

There was a strong consensus among all the stakeholders in this study that visitable housing offers a variety of benefits. The benefits cited by stakeholders included:

convenience and easy access for older people, young children, parents with strollers, and wheelchair users; an accommodating environment for residents of all ages, especially for the ageing population; a spacious open concept with large doorways and hallways; a welcome environment for visitors with diverse needs; reduced risk of falls and injury caused by steps; easy moving of heavy items (such as, furniture); easy snow shoveling without steps; aesthetic appeal.

- build a step-free front entrance (without a ramp)
- address drainage concerns
- incorporate basement windows without window wells

In order to address these issues, homebuilders had to develop and apply new building techniques. These challenges caused initial resistance to visitable housing from some builders. Addressing potential construction problems still remains challenging for some builders. At the time of this study, after several years of building visitable houses, however, most homebuilders expressed confidence in their knowledge and skills in building visitable houses.

Costs

Whether the building of visitable houses incurs additional costs remains inconclusive. Building a VisitAble house can be more expensive than building a non-visitable house, but not necessarily. In the Bridgwater neighbourhoods, the reported additional cost to build VisitAble houses varied. Some builders and sales agents said the additional cost was negligible, while other builders reported the difference could be several thousands of Canadian dollars. The key cost-factors were the lot grading, and the design and material used for the basement and foundation walls. Many lots designated for visitable houses were more expensive than other lots in the Bridgwater neighbourhoods. However, this was not due to visitable housing, but to other amenities incorporated in those lots, such as landscaping for walkout / lookout houses, a rear walkway system, and proximity to and views of man-made lakes.

Construction challenges and issues

Some construction issues need to be considered and addressed when building visitable houses. Most construction challenges are related to the step-free entrance. The homebuilders in this study suggest that making wide doorways, hallways and a large bathroom on the main floor usually does not pose a construction challenge. To build a step-free entrance, proper lot grading is essential. The lot grading for visitable houses in the Bridgwater neighbourhoods was designed and developed in ways that make it easy to:

Professionals' perspectives and knowledge

The attitude and knowledge of housing professionals (including, land developers, homebuilders, architects, sales agents) about visitable housing plays a critical role in its adoption in the industry and market. Many of the housing professionals involved in the Bridgwater project, especially homebuilders, were initially skeptical or resistant to visitable housing. At the development stage of the project, most professionals were not

familiar with the concept of visitable houses. They perceived that there was no consumer demand for visitable housing, except for people with mobility issues. Some professionals' negative attitude and lack of knowledge about visitable housing pose significant challenges to advancing visitable housing. In fact, some supposedly visitable houses in the neighbourhoods failed to meet the basic visitability requirements. At the time of this study, however, only one homebuilder in the study remained negative about visitable housing. Most building and development professionals in this study said that their perception towards visitable housing had changed from skeptical to positive since their involvement in the project.

Marketability of visitable housing

Most stakeholders in this study agreed that visitable housing is marketable and has a good market value. While acknowledging that visitable houses are beneficial for everyone, stakeholders in this study suggested that the changing demographic with the aging population makes visitable housing even more attractive. The factors that may decrease the marketability of visitable housing are additional costs (perceived or real) and lack of public awareness. Stakeholders in this study suggested that show homes and piloting a small number of visitable houses first were good strategies to increase the awareness and get buy-in from the public and professionals.

Responses to visitable housing

At the time of this study, most stakeholders were very positive about visitable housing. Some of them, especially building professionals, however, said that their perception of visitable housing had changed from being skeptical or resistant to positive, since their involvement in this project. The most positive feedback came from the homeowners / residents of visitable houses in the neighbourhoods. There was negative feedback about visitable housing related to additional costs, construction issues, and restrictions on basements (for example, basement heights and windows). Feedback on the large bathrooms on the main floor was mixed. Some people liked a spacious bathroom on the main floor and others viewed a large bathroom taking space from other living areas, such as a living room or a kitchen. Many stakeholders who had

been involved in the project showed increased awareness and interest in accessibility in the home environment.



A front view of a Visitable home with a level threshold, level path to the side of the home and a wide entrance

For further information, email the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies

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