

# VISITABILITY AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ACCESSIBLE ARCHITECTURE

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I was only three months old when my father was injured in an industrial accident that rendered him a paraplegic. Growing up after the accident, I experienced the built environment from the unique perspective of travelling around with someone who uses a wheelchair. My father and I rarely entered a building in the same way as the majority of others; the service entrance was the norm for us. We were also less likely to visit friends at their homes. Helping my father up to the front door from a set of exterior stairs was both dangerous and a reminder that he had less independence than others. Even when we did visit someone else's home, our stay would usually be short because my father was unable to use the washroom.

It is because of these types of experiences that I chose to work in the field of architecture. And working as an architect, I now realize how easy it is to design a building or space to be more useable by more people, including persons with disabilities.

The concept of "visitability" is one of the simplest and most economical approaches to accessible design that can address homeowners' and community needs over time, contributing to a more flexible and sustainable built environment. Visitability ensures that everyone – regardless of mobility – will be able to at least visit someone else's home and use the washroom. Building a visitable home is easy and includes only three simple requirements: one entrance into the home with no steps; a 32 inch minimum wide clear passage through all main floor doors and hallways; and a usable bathroom on the

main floor. Visitable housing features should be beautiful and invisible so that everyone uses the home in the same way, and such that the visible features blend in with the architectural style of the home. While visitable homes do not include full accessibility features for people with disabilities, they do allow a person with a mobility limitation to at least enter and visit the occupants of the house.

Visitable housing promotes socially sustainable communities and provides residents with choice as housing needs change over a lifetime. The Canadian Mortgage Housing Corporation has stated: "By 2031, the number of seniors over age 75 will grow by 277 percent to about 4 million, up from 1.5 million in 1995. The number of seniors in the over 85 age group will more than triple to over 1 million from 352,000 in 1995." Many in this growing senior population will have mobility limitations and it is important to plan for this shift in our building designs. Visitable housing responds to the increasing seniors' population and their desire to "age in place." The vast majority of elderly persons prefer to remain in their homes as long as possible. With today's housing stock, this is virtually impossible.

It is easiest to implement visitable housing when it is planned for in the neighborhood design process. Visitability tends to be more difficult to realize in mature neighborhoods because these areas never considered the concept in the planning stages. In new construction, total added cost for visitability features is typically less than \$1,000, with no extra

square footage required to accommodate the universal design needs. This would reduce future renovation costs by thousands of dollars as accessible dwelling modifications can range from \$10,000 to over \$200,000. Neighbourhood plans to accommodate visitable housing would lower underground service lines to accommodate a deeper basement, slope the land so that the highest point is in the middle of the lot, and maintain a greater distance between a home's front door and the sidewalk to achieve a gently sloping walkway.

The best example of progressive planning for visitable housing has been achieved in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Bridgewater Project, started in 2006, is a housing development initiative involving three residential neighborhoods and a Town Center in the Waverley West area in South West Winnipeg. Over 1,000 visitable single-family lots have been planned into the development. New neighbourhood developments, like the Blatchford site in Edmonton, have the opportunity to become leading examples of the tremendous benefits of visitable housing.

Unfortunately, there is a continued dearth of knowledge surrounding the concept of visitability. The building industry most often does not stray from the construction processes with which it is familiar and general contractors do not tend to train sub-trades on new construction methods unless they see immediate, short-term financial benefits. Architects and other designers are often motivated in the same way unless they are paid specifically to research

a concept of visitability, and organizations and individual homeowners are reluctant to cover such costs. Governments at all levels are generally reluctant to enforce too much legislation on the development and building industry, although most research on visitability is government-funded. Currently, only government-funded public buildings require universal and adaptable features to benefit persons with disabilities, but the single family home is not part of this legislation.

I know from personal experience the benefits of focusing on the end users of a building or space in order to allow them to access it independently. With my own house renovation, I poured a new sidewalk leading to the front door that provided smooth, on-grade access straight into the front door. Before the renovation, three steps led up to the front door, and my wheelchair bound

father had to park his van in the driveway and phone us to come out and help him inside. After the renovation, my father can now wheel himself straight into my family home. It was a seemingly small design gesture – but one with a huge emotional impact.

*Ron Wickman runs his own architectural practice in Edmonton, specializing in barrier-free design that accommodates the needs of individuals with disabilities. He is committed to providing affordable, accessible and adaptable housing and has won several housing competitions.*

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Images: Ron Wickman