

I was only three months old when my father was injured in an industrial accident that rendered him a paraplegic. Growing up then, I experienced the built environment from the unique perspective of traveling 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 home stairs was both dangerous and a reminder that he had less independence than others. Even when we would visit someone else's home, our stay was usually 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.

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 these persons with disabilities. The concept of visitability is one of the more simple and economical approaches to universal design that can address homeowner's and community needs over time and contribute 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.

Visitable homes are constructed to be more accessible by having:

1. One entrance into the home with no steps;
2. A 32 inch clear passage through all main floor doors and hallways; and
3. A useable bathroom on the main floor.

Visitable homes do not include full accessibility features for people with disabilities. But the three simple requirements of visitability do allow a person with a mobility limitation to at least enter and visit the occupants of the house.

Visitable housing is needed now. The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation has stated: "By 2031, the number of seniors over age 75 will grow by 277 percent to about four million from 1.5 million in 1995. The number of seniors in the 85+ age group will more than triple to over one million from 352,000 in 1995." Many of this growing senior population will have a mobility limitation. If we built visitable housing today, the future economic benefits will be vast. I have completed close to 100 accessible dwelling modifications ranging from \$10,000.00 to over \$200,000.00 in construction costs. I am constantly challenged to design accessible home modifications to be economical, beautiful and sustainable. What an incredible waste of resources if we build homes today, just to tear them apart 10 years from now to make them accessible for persons with disabilities; especially given the statistical information that we already know.

The concept of visitability is important for so many reasons.

- In new construction, total added cost for visitability features is typically less than \$300.00, with no extra square footage required. This would reduce future renovation costs by thousands of dollars.

- 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.
- Visitable housing promotes socially sustainable communities and provides residents with choice as housing needs change over ones lifetime. The intent here is to simplify life for everyone by creating housing that is more useable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost.
- Visitable housing promotes safety by reducing stair related injuries for residents and visitors. Residents could also live at home if they were ever to suffer a temporary or permanent injury as a result of an accident; this would reduce the length of stay in a hospital environment.
- Visitable housing is more adaptable and flexible for persons with disabilities as well as persons carrying groceries into the home, transporting a stroller or moving furniture.
- Visitable housing needs to be beautiful and invisible so that everyone uses the home in the same way, and so the visitable features blend in with the architectural style of the home.
- Visitable features can easily be incorporated with other building innovations such as affordable design, green architecture and energy efficiency. Resale value of a home with visitable features should not be negatively affected as the features are invisible in the design.

Why does there seem to be a lack of acceptance to visitable features in housing design by developer, builders, designers, policy makers, jurisdictions, organizations and individuals? There is simply a lack of knowledge of what visitability is. The building industry most often likes to keep repeating the construction processes it is familiar with; general contractors do not like to train sub-trades to unfamiliar construction methods unless they see immediate, short-term financial benefit. Architects and other designers are often motivated in the same way unless they are paid specifically to research a concept of visitability. Organizations and individual home owners are also reluctant to pay for such research by Architects and other designers. Most research then is conducted through government funded grants.

Governments at all levels are generally reluctant to enforce too much legislation on the development and building industry. Currently, there is no legislation specifically addressing visitability in Canada. 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. Sweden first started using the term visitability in 1976. The concept slowly filtered into the rest of Europe, the United Kingdom (Lifetime Homes), Japan, Australia (Smart Housing), the United States and then Canada. Research shows that the majority of visitable housing has been built with financial assistance from one or more levels of government.

Today, there is a rapid increase of “visitability” legislation in the United States which demonstrates a growing awareness of the need for housing with specific features that afford all individuals, especially those with disabilities, independent and safe access. Disability groups and advocates have been very successful in getting visitable housing legislation passed and played a significant role in the promotion and monitoring of this legislation. Such activism and promotion has led to a positive development for visitability in the world of US Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. A LEED point is now given in the Neighborhood Development Section, when designers incorporate basic universal access into single-family homes.

In Canada, there is growing awareness of visitability, and those of us who are working hard to create change feel the momentum building. For example, the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), a consumer-directed, university-affiliated research, education and knowledge dissemination national organization based in Winnipeg has recently concluded a year long national action-oriented research project ‘Understanding the Status of Visitability in Canada’ funded by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Province of Manitoba, Housing and Family Services. The goal of the project was to analyze the progress and diffusion of Visitability in Canada and to determine potential facilitators, barriers, best practices, gaps, trends and issues. The project included an environmental scan, literature review, online survey, website and Think Tank conference. I participated in the once a month telephone conference calls that took place over the year. The planning sessions and Visitability Think Tank, which took place on May 11-13, 2007 in Winnipeg, Manitoba were the first of its kind in Canada. This was an incredible opportunity for some like minded, energetic and thoughtful persons to share experiences and ideas that will help to ultimately lead to a more inclusive society. During our last telephone conference call, I believe we all agreed that most importantly to achieve future progress we need a uniform approach to promote the construction of visitable homes in Canada. Certainly, there is more power and influence in numbers.

My personal quest is to help other architects learn more about Universal Design in general and Visitability specifically. Frank Lloyd Wright stated that “form and function are one”. To me, this means that architecture involves making buildings and spaces as accessible to as many people as possible. Today, too many architects focus on the business and aesthetic dimensions of design, and little attention is given to the end users of their creations. I know from personal experience the benefits of focusing on the end users of a building or space. I have had the satisfaction of seeing someone independently access their home or a public building for which I am responsible. 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 I renovated my home which had three steps leading to the front door, my father, who used a wheelchair, would park his van in the driveway and phone us to come out and help him in. After the home renovation, my father was now able to wheel straight into our family home. It was a seemingly small design gesture - with huge emotional impact.

For more information and resources on VISIBLE Housing in Canada and to share initiatives that are occurring in your province please visit www.visitablehousing.com or contact the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, 56 The Promenade Winnipeg, Manitoba Tel: 204-287-8411, Fax: 204-284-5343, TTY: 204-475-6223, Email: ccds@disabilitystudies.ca.

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