

Visitability: Moving Towards Livable, Sustainable Housing and Communities in Canada

Visitable housing is a simple approach to accessibility, inclusion, and community development that has many potential benefits. Researchers from the Canadian Centre on Disability Research, **Olga Krassioukova-Enns, Laura Rempel, and Laurie Ringaert**, outline the idea of 'visitability' and its benefits.

THE IDEA OF LIVABLE COMMUNITIES encompass concepts of inclusion, diversity, and social and environmental sustainability for all generations. A unified, forward-thinking approach is required from the government, professionals, and the public to create livable and sustainable environments for the future. Livability, according to American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), includes access to public transportation, a walkable community close to amenities, safety and security, access to health, recreation and cultural services, and a caring, supportive community with adequate, affordable, accessible housing. Visitable housing (visitability) is one simple approach that can address homeowners' and community needs over time and contribute to a more livable, healthy environment.

The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies is conducting a national research project called Understanding the Status of Visitability in Canada. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation and the Province of Manitoba, Housing and Family Services are funding the year-long initiative. The project team consists of our project leaders Dr. Olga Krassioukova-Enns

and Laurie Ringaert, our senior advisor Eleanor Smith, founder of Concrete Change, and research assistant Laura Rempel. The goal of this study is to analyze the progress and diffusion of visitability in Canada to determine facilitators, barriers, best practices, gaps, trends, and issues related to the subject. The research will be completed through a scan, literature review, website, survey, and conference.

More than a policy and technical strategy, visitability is a movement to change home construction practices so that virtually all new single-family homes offer a few specific features that make the home easier for people who develop a mobility impairment to live in and visit. Visitability ensures that everyone, regardless of mobility, will be able to at least visit someone else's home, use the washroom and exit the home. The technical requirements include: a zero step entrance, at least 32-inch clear opening width of main floor doorways, and at least a half bath on the main floor. Visitability begins to address these changing needs that are useful for everyone including seniors, children, parents, and people with limited mobility.

Why Visitability is important?

- Visitability increases opportunities for social interaction and inclusive, livable communities.
- Visitability responds to the increasing seniors population and the desire to ‘age in place.’
- Visitability promotes socially sustainable communities and retains an experienced group of people by providing choice as housing needs change over one’s lifetime.
- Reduction in environmental and monetary costs as home renovations are fewer or not required at time of mobility changes.
- Visitability reduces stair-related injuries and can reduce length of hospital visits as patients can go home to recuperate.
- Visitability allows more flexibility in moving furniture, carrying groceries into the home, transporting a stroller or wagon, among other items.
- Visitability provides value added and can easily be incorporated with other building innovation such as affordable design, energy efficient housing, and green design.

Canada is not the first country to incorporate visitability. In 1976, Sweden started using the term and practicing design strategies that slowly



A ‘visible’ house in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

PHOTO: CANADIAN CENTRE ON DISABILITY STUDIES

filtered into the rest of Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, United States, and now Canada. The initiatives may have been called by another name, such as Lifetime Homes (U.K.) or Smart Housing (Australia), but all uphold the premise of visitability or surpass the basic guidelines.

The world’s baby boomer population is approaching retirement age and has more lifestyle options than any other retiring generation—they are living longer, are in better health, and have more wealth. Over the next 25 years, the number of Canadians over 65 years of age will increase to approximately 9 million. Visible housing is one solution to changing needs and desires of a population to remain in their homes or ‘age in place.’ In order to age in place efficiently, the whole community must be

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developed with social and environmental sustainability in mind. These principles are not specific to retirement age communities but are examples of good design practices that benefit everyone.

Implementing long-term, livable, sustainable, and visitable housing practices at the design and planning phase provides better integration into the natural and built environments. Further, homeowners realize cost savings, as fewer changes are required later on. Community development could easily incorporate efficient, affordable, green design strategies into housing, such as passive ventilation, energy efficiency, or living off the energy grid, with visitability. Communities also need to maintain green spaces, create pedestrian centred spaces, and promote sustainability and global citizenship.

A prominent step forward for visitability has been developed by the U.S Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program. They have recently established a point towards a LEED rating in the Neighbourhood Development section when designers incorporate basic universal access into single-family homes.

Moving Forward: Think Tank

A national Visitability Think Tank on Livable, Sustainable Housing and Communities will take place May 11-13 2007 in Winnipeg Manitoba. The event will connect key stakeholders, such as policy makers, design professionals, home building, community development, and real estate professionals, health care professionals,

and aging and disability researchers and organizations. The Think Tank will make it possible to gather information from a wide audience and facilitate networking and sharing the results of our research. The Think Tank will consist of keynote speakers such as Mayor Roger Claar of Bolingbrook, Illinois, whose community has developed a building code ordinance that ensures that all new homes incorporate visitability. There will also be presentations, panel discussions, and participants will create a 'Framework for Action' on visitability in Canada. The goals of the Think Tank include learning about national trends, initiatives, successes and challenges, establishing links between visitability, environmentally sustainable and affordable housing markets, and to be a catalyst for change contributing to inclusive, sustainable communities that support all people. ■

The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) is a well-established consumer-directed, university-affiliated research, education and information dissemination organization based in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

For more information and resources on visitability in Canada and internationally please visit
<www.visitablehousingcanada.com>.

To share your opinions and experiences, please fill out our Visitability Housing Canada survey at
<www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=999213054944>.

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