Visitability

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The Visitable Home concept refers to [usually] newly-constructed single-family homes with the following minimum features:

- one zero-step entrance at the front, back or side of the house (Located on an accessible route from the street), with a threshold height of no more than 13mm (1/2 inch).
- all main floor doors, including bathrooms, have at least 813 mm (32 inches) of clear space.
- at least a half bath on the main floor. (from www.visitablehousingcanada.com)

The premise is that those who use a wheelchair should be able to be welcomed in any home, be able to use the main floor areas, and use a washroom. With numbers of disabled people and seniors on the rise, it follows that a homeowner, or a member of her family, may someday experience a disability themselves.

In the past, those in wheelchairs faced a very poor set of housing options: they were usually required to renovate an existing home to meet their needs. Houses designed to be Visitable may later be upgraded with more features of Universal Design. These may include: lever door handles, reinforcing walls in bathrooms to accommodate grab bars, a complete main floor wheel-in bath, light switches and thermostats placed at 48 inches from the floor, or an elevator or suitable closet space that may be converted in the future.

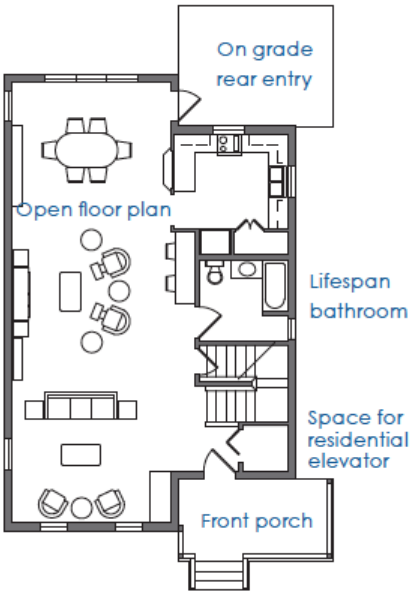


FIGURE: a Visitable floor plan. Note closet space easily convertible to an elevator. Living or dining areas could be reconfigured into a bedroom if necessary. **credit:** *THE CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS (IDEA)*

History

In North America, the movement began in 1986, when Eleanor Smith, a disability rights advocate, of the organization Concrete Change in Atlanta, Georgia, realized how little was being done to implement Universal Design in new residential builds. Initially named "Basic Home Access", Smith soon learned of the "Visitability" movement, which had originated in Sweden in 1976. (from http://concretechange.org/visitability/early-history/)

Visitability is a first step towards Universal Design. It emerged in response to the slow adoption of Universal Design (UD) principles in the realm of single-family residential housing. In distilling the UD requirements down to only the three most crucial, the goal is to win over developers and homebuyers to accept and implement them in new homes without imposing regulations on private home-builders. The hope is that proving wheelchair-accessible housing to be intelligent, affordable and sustainable, will speed its diffusion.

FIGURE (top left): A Visitable housing development. **credit:** *THE CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS (IDEA)*

FIGURE (top right): Housing Development, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 2009. One house out of thirty-four were designed to be Visitable. **credit:** *Friesen Tokar Architects with Habitat for Humanity*

FIGURE: The zero-step threshold does not need to be the front door. An alley can provide rear or side access to the home. **credit:** *THE CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS (IDEA)*

Why is Visitability important?

- it increases opportunities for social interaction and inclusive, livable communities;
- it responds to the increasing population of senior and disabled persons and the desire to age-in-place;
- it promotes sustainable design in regards to housing needs over one's lifetime (lifecycle costs) and reduction in environmental and monetary costs due to home renovations when mobility changes;
- it reduces stair related injuries and can reduce length of hospital visits as patients can go home because of accessibility features;
- it allows more flexibility in moving furniture, carrying groceries into the home, transporting a stroller or wagon among other items;
- it provides added value and can be incorporated with other building innovations such as affordable design, energy efficient housing and green design. (Krassioukova, 2007, p.46)

Visitability was first defined in Sweden in 1976, then spread to Europe, the UK, Japan and North America.

Of course Visitability is not only relevant to the senior population. In 2006, 15.7 percent of adults and children in Manitoba had a disability. (Statistics Canada)

Cost

Visitability has always been focussed on affordability, since it recognizes the importance of "selling" homebuyers and private sector developers on the benefits of "building in" some basic accessible features. It is cheaper to build in wider doors and a powder room on the main floor, than it is to renovate or to move house (often at the stressful time that an illness occurs). Since it is a simplified set of Universal Design principles, Visitability is a much cheaper option than Universal Design.

Due to market variations, an analysis of building costs must take place at the local level to be useful. A Manitoba case study (PARA *et al*, Visitable Housing Cost Estimate Summary, 2007) found the cost of two sample "re-designs" of Qualico Homes in Waverley West, to be between $3095.00 and $8073.00. They found that since the interiors already had wide passages and doorways and large rooms, most changes to the design, and therefore most of the costs, arose from landscaping changes to the exterior to accommodate the zero-step entry.

FIGURE (left): Hallways and corridors are at least 36 in. clear with allowable pinch points of 32 in. clear width for no longer than 24 inches.
credit: *THE CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS (IDEA, 2009)*

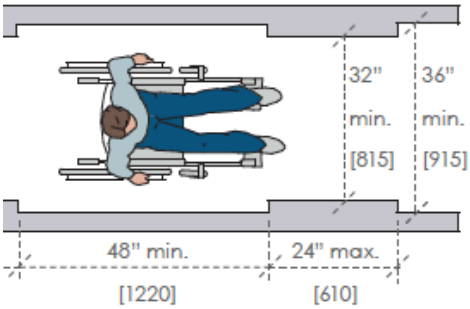
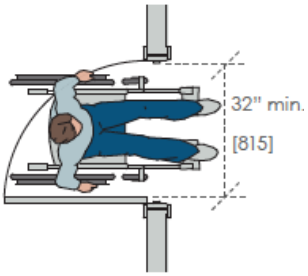


FIGURE (right): interior doors – 31 3/4 in. min. clear width measured from the jamb to the inside face of the door when held open at 90 degrees.
credit: *THE CENTER FOR INCLUSIVE DESIGN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ACCESS (IDEA, 2009)*



With a growing awareness that living conditions in the home can have a strong bearing on an individual's well-being, Visitability can also reduce the personal, medical and social costs to individuals and their carers of transport, moving house, medical care, and isolation by allowing "aging-in-place".

Visitability in Manitoba

According to their website, Manitoba Housing is currently renovating their housing stock to make 45 units "accessible" and "approximately 20 per cent of units built under the Affordable Housing Initiative (AHI) contain visitable design features." (from www.gov.mb.ca/dio/openingdoors/housing.html).

Since 2010, houses in Bridgwater Forest and Bridgwater Lakes in southwest Winnipeg have been offering some Visitable home sites and styles.

In 2002, fifty percent of all Canadian waste generated, originated from renovations, construction and demolition sources.

(Stats Canada)

Future Challenges

Only a small percentage of homes in Winnipeg are built with all three Visitable features. Today, interiors with adequate doorways are largely standard, but very few houses are built with zero-step entries. We might speculate this could be due to fear of flooding, a perception of unsightliness in typical ramp design, the site cost of extra landscaping and drainage, or some other reason.

Visitability must convince consumers to look into the future, to a day when they, or their loved ones may no longer be able-bodied, either temporarily or permanently. Nobody wants to think about these scenarios, so natural optimism stands in the way of what could be a very practical approach.

By avoiding renovations, Visitabily is both sustainable and affordable.

Visitability is arguably much easier to achieve in suburban neighbourhoods, where sites are more spacious. Going forwards there is a recognized need to address the Visitability of older houses especially in urban areas.

Recently, Concrete Change has been working with the US Green Building Council to provide a LEED point credit for projects built on Visitable design principles.

Other housing concepts for further study:

accessible design
barrier-free
design for all
flexible housing
inclusive design
independent living
Lifetime Homes (UK)
Livable communities
Smart Housing (AUS)
The Grow Home
The Next Home
Universal Design

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http://www.gaates.org/documents/bp_Housing_ex.shtml

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