

# Visitability in Canada

*Moving Toward Livable, Sustainable Housing and Communities*

LIVABLE COMMUNITIES encompass the ideas of inclusion, diversity, and social and environmental sustainability for all generations. Livability, according to the American Association for Retired Persons (AARP), includes access to public transportation, a walkable community close to amenities, access to health, recreation and cultural services, and a caring, supportive, safe neighbourhood with adequate, affordable, accessible housing. Visitability or visitable housing is an essential element that contributes to a more livable and sustainable built environment by addressing homeowners' and community needs over time. Visitability is a movement to change home construction practices so that virtually all new homes – not merely those custom-built for occupants who currently have disabilities – offer a few specific features that make the home easier for people who develop mobility disabilities to live in and visit ([www.concretechange.org](http://www.concretechange.org)).

Do our homes really welcome members of our families and communities? Visitability lends itself to social interaction among friends, family and neighbours in the community, but more importantly in each of our homes. Visitability guarantees that everyone regardless of physical mobility will be able to visit a friend's home, feel welcome to share meals and use the washroom. Visitability is a policy and technical strategy to change the way we think about social inclusion, interactions in our own homes, and participation in our communities. It begins to address the changing needs of seniors, people with limited mobility, children and parents. To make visitability a norm, inclusive, sustainable approaches to community planning and the design and construction of single and multi-family homes is required.

Incorporating the following three basic features can make all homes more usable and safe for the people who live in them and more welcoming for those who come to visit: a zero-step entrance, wider doorways (at least a 32" clear opening) and at least a half bathroom on the main floor.



Think Tank delegates tour a visitable house in Winnipeg.

Many initiatives exceed these minimum features and increase the universal design of the built environment.

## Visitability is Important Because It:

- Increases opportunities for social interaction and contributes to inclusive, livable communities
- Responds to the increasing seniors population and the desire to "age in place"
- Promotes socially sustainable communities that retain community knowledge and wisdom by providing choice as housing needs change over one's lifetime
- Reduces environmental and financial costs as home renovations are fewer or not required at time of mobility changes
- Reduces stair-related injuries and can reduce length of hospital visits as patients can go home to recuperate
- Allows more flexibility in moving furniture, carrying groceries into the home, transporting a stroller or wagon and mobility aids such as scooters, walkers and wheelchairs
- Adds value to a home and can easily be incorporated into other building innovations, such as affordable housing and green design strategies

Canada is not the first country to incorporate visitability. In 1976, Sweden started using the term and practising the design strategies that slowly filtered into the rest of Europe, the United Kingdom, Japan, Australia, the United States and now Canada. The initiatives may have another name, such as Lifetime Homes (UK) or Smart Housing (Australia) but all uphold the premise of visitability or surpass the three basic guidelines. The U.S Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) program has made an important step towards visitability. It recently established a Pilot Program for Neighbourhood Development that will designate a point toward a LEED rating when designers incorporate basic universal access into plans for single-family homes.

The world's baby boomers are approaching retirement age and have more lifestyle options as they are living longer, are in better health and have more wealth. In the next 25 years the number of Canadians over 65 years of age will increase to approximately 9 million. Visitability is one solution to changing needs and desires of a population to stay active and connected with other people while remaining in their homes. Visitability

housing is a component of community strategies that supports aging in place. Such strategies address the environment at the scale of the home, the exterior environment and connections to services.

There is no standard template for development of socially and environmentally sustainable communities, but there are important elements and principles, such as environmentally sensitive development, well-designed and well-constructed buildings that take into account the lifecycle of structure and occupants, interconnected residential and community services, and a built environment that addresses equality. It is important to engage and respond to the diversity of each community's needs and encourage personal and community action to increase inclusion and well-being of your community. These principles are not specific to retirement-age communities, but are examples of good design practices that can be applied to downtown, suburban and rural areas – benefiting everyone.

Implementing long-term, livable, sustainable and visitable housing principles at the design and planning phase provides better integration into the natural and built environments, and results in time, cost and material savings as fewer changes are required later on.

### Visitability Research in Canada

The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS), a consumer-directed, university-affiliated research, education and knowledge dissemination national organization based in Winnipeg has conducted 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 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.

The Visitable Housing in Canada Survey was an online survey occurring between March 31 and May 31, 2007. A total of 189 responses were received, of which 98% were Canadian. The respon-



Visitability Think Tank – Front: Eleanor Smith (Founder of Concrete Change), George Dyck (President of CCDS Board); Back: Jenny Gerbasi (Winnipeg City Councillor), Roger Clear (Mayor of Bolingbrook, Illinois), Olga Krassioukova-Enns (Executive Director of CCDS and Project co-leader) and Laurie Ringaert (Project co-leader).

dents included architects, planners, designers, homebuilders, persons with disabilities, seniors, researchers, occupational therapists, caregivers and educators, among others. The survey tool has greatly increased our knowledge of provincial initiatives and public perception on the topic.

A first national Visitability Think Tank on Livable, Sustainable Housing and Communities was held by CCDS on May 11-13, 2007, in Winnipeg. The event brought together over 60 key stakeholders, such as seniors and disability organizations, policy makers, designers, homebuilders, community developers, real estate professionals, municipal officials, health care professionals and building code specialists. The Think Tank activities included presentations, discussion periods and site tours of visitable homes in Winnipeg. The goals of the Think Tank included learning about national and international trends, initiatives, successes and challenges; establishing links between visitability, environmentally sustainable and affordable housing markets; and creating catalysts for change, thus contributing to inclusive, sustainable communities that support all citizens.

The site tours included visiting three

very differently motivated homes. The first home was both visitable and fully accessible, and built with those features in mind from the planning stage (to allow for a person using a wheelchair to live in the home and allow friends to visit). The second was a visitable renovation (to allow a family member using a wheelchair to visit). The third was a visitable affordable housing project for a family of 11, none of whom currently require basic accessibility.

The outcome of the Think Tank was the development of the Framework for Action for Canada that outlined the following actions:

- Education and awareness raising of public, professionals, policy makers, designers, homebuilders and other key sectors
- Development of strategic partnerships with key groups
- Continued research and validation of visitability premise with Canadian perspectives
- Maintain the momentum for visitability in Canada built from the Think Tank
- Identification of how to target legislation and regulation in documents like the National Building Code
- Development of a feedback mechanism for continued dialogue, new projects and initiatives

CCDS has committed itself to hosting a follow-up event in early 2008 to continue to support this work.

*The Visitable Housing in Canada website is a public and professional education tool for disseminating the action oriented research CCDS has initiated. The website creates a national dialogue and network, enables us to collect and share information on best practices, conduct our online survey, and keep the public informed and involved.*

*For more information and resources on Visitable Housing in Canada and to share initiatives that are occurring in your province, please visit [www.visitablehousingcanada.com](http://www.visitablehousingcanada.com) or contact the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, 56 The Promenade Winnipeg, MB, R3B 3H9. Tel: 204 287-8411, fax: 204 284-5343, TTY: 204 475-6223, email: [ccds@disabilitystudies.ca](mailto:ccds@disabilitystudies.ca).*