

Housing Visitability: A Necessary Trend

With more than three-fourths of the U.S. population in housing types not covered by the Fair Housing Act's accessible construction requirements, an aging population, and a trend toward independent living for the 15 percent of U.S. citizens reporting a disability—the emergence of visitable homes is long overdue.

BOLINGBROOK, ILLINOIS, A TOWN of 65,000 residents located 30 miles southwest of downtown Chicago, is considered a trailblazer in the housing visitability movement. Five years ago, the town adopted an ordinance requiring that all new detached, single-family homes include three features to make them more easily accessible to people with mobility impairments—a zero-step entrance (not necessarily the front or main entrance), wide interior doors on the first floor, and a bathroom on the first floor. The more than 3,600 visitable homes built in Bolingbrook look just like conventional homes. “The average person can’t tell the difference aesthetically between visitable homes and regular homes,” observes Bolingbrook’s mayor, Roger Claar.

Visitable homes are attractive not only to those with disabilities, but also to seniors and families with small children. The ready access and wide doorways make it easier to move wheelchairs as well as baby strollers, bicycles, and furniture in and out of homes and through rooms. “More expensive, higher-end homes have

wider doors, anyway. People say, “Wow, this is spacious. And look how easy it is to carry groceries in and out of the house,” notes Claar. In addition, the absence of entrance steps reduces falls for seniors and others in the home.

For seniors and people with disabilities, the three simple features of visitable homes may mean the difference between social isolation and integration, between remaining at home and moving into an institution. People who live in visitable homes can more readily go out to work, shop, dine, visit others, or entertain friends and family. Thus, visitable homes can strengthen communities by making possible easy social interaction of physically limited citizens and allowing those with new or long-term disabilities to reside, temporarily or long term, in their own homes.

Builders are catching on. “Whenever I work with clients to help design a home, I always remind them that they won’t have perfect health and agility forever so, like [having] an insurance policy, they should plan now for their future

needs,” says Pat Caporale, principal of Caporale Construction Ltd., in Victoria, British Columbia.

Mobility-limiting design is a major force driving seniors and persons with disabilities out of homes and into institutions. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report that 60 percent of people who enter nursing homes come directly from a hospital or rehabilitation facility. People in crisis, including those recovering from falls or other incapacitating events, often do not have the time or resources to hire a contractor to renovate their home for easier access in the short period before they are dismissed from a hospital.

Visitability is an affordable, sustainable, and inclusive model of residential design for whole communities. Unlike the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which covers public spaces and buildings, and the Fair Housing Act Amendment of 1988, which applies only to multifamily housing, visitability can make all housing more accessible. With more than three-fourths of the U.S. population in housing types not covered by the Fair Housing Act’s accessible construction requirements, an aging population, and a trend toward independent living for the 15 percent of U.S. citizens reporting a disability, the emergence of visitable homes is long overdue. According to Merck Institute of Aging and Health in Washington, D.C., the demographic tidal wave is coming: 20 percent of all Americans, or about 70 million people, will have passed their 65th birthday by 2030.

Over 25,000 visitable homes have been constructed in the United States, mostly in the South and Southwest, according to the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of Buffalo. Most are the result of local ordinances that



A zero-step entrance (at left) makes homes more easily accessible to people with mobility impairments than the conventional multiple step entrance (at right).

mandate their construction. Of the 35 local visitability ordinances on the books, 20 require that a percentage of new single-family homes include the three standard features of visitability (see figure). In Arizona, Bolingbrook, Tuscon, and Pima County require all new homes to be visitable. Other ordi-

nances encourage the construction of such homes through tax incentives or other means.

Chicago's ordinance requires only that 20 percent of homes in a new development be visitable. The St. Louis ordinance applies only to new homes built with county funds.

Pittsburgh and Houston provide tax incentives for construction of visitable homes, while a few jurisdictions (San Mateo County, California, and Howard County, Maryland) focus on raising consumer awareness. Atlanta's 1992 visitability ordinance, reportedly the first in the world to require a zero-step entrance and wide doors in some privately owned houses, applies to houses that receive some form of public assistance, which includes many privately owned medium-priced houses as well as affordable homes like those built by Habitat for Humanity. Since 1992, other developers across the country have adopted visitability features—and not just for low-income housing.

Adoption of visitability mandates often come about only after pitched battles between advocates of visitable homes and the homebuilding industry. "Certainly, the National Association of Home Builders and its state affiliates have been the most powerful opponents of legislation, while at the same time failing to change their practices voluntarily," says Darrell Price, housing policy coordinator at Access Living of Metropolitan Chicago. "But perhaps that will change." In Bolingbrook, homebuilders initially threatened not to build in the town if such an ordinance were adopted. But, none has left, including large national companies such as Pulte Homes. In Arizona, Pima County's Inclusive Home Design Ordinance, adopted in 2002, withstood legal challenge by the Southern Arizona Homebuilders Association. The ordinance, which applies to unincorporated areas, requires new homes to have at least one entrance with no steps, doors at least 32 inches wide, and 36-inch-wide hallways on the main floor. It also requires reinforced walls in ground-floor bathrooms so that occupants can install grab bars. To date, over 15,000 visitable homes have been built in the county as a result of the ordinance.

Last October, the city of Tucson replicated the Pima County ordinance, mandating access in all new houses beginning this past January.

Opposition to visitability ordinances may be waning, in part, notes Price, because "builders are growing older just like everyone else, and so are their parents." In addition, the myths surrounding visitability—high costs to builders and buyers, lack of market interest, incompatibility with other urban design—are being challenged successfully by nonprofit advocacy groups such as Concrete Change, based in Atlanta. Since its founding in the late 1980s, Concrete Change has been providing support and educational materials to communities across the country and around the world, while working with national trend leaders in design and construction to gain recognition for the merits of broad use of key visitable features. According to the nonprofit group, builders inexperienced with visitability tend to make widely varying estimates for what the visitability features might cost.

Data on the actual cost of incorporating the minimum elements of visitable homes are scarce. A professional construction cost estimator, hired by the Pima County government as part of its ordinance initiative, estimated the total added cost for all visitability features, for new homes built on concrete slabs, at less than \$100. Caporale contends that the added cost for visitable features is modest. "When I build a new home, I always try to install 36-inch-wide doorways and 42- to 48-inch hallways. People just think that the home seems so roomy, they don't notice that it could also facilitate a walker or even a wheelchair in some cases," he adds. "There are a lot of little tricks in the construction of a visitable home. Individually, no home costs more than a few extra dollars, and collectively they add up to only a few hundred dollars at most. Yet, they are not typical construction, so

VISITABILITY ORDINANCES IN THE UNITED STATES

Year	Location	Type of Program
1992	Atlanta, GA	Mandatory
1997	Freehold Borough, NJ	Voluntary/Incentive
1998	Austin, TX	Mandatory
1999	Irvine, CA	Voluntary
2000	Urbana, IL	Mandatory
2001	Visalia, CA	Voluntary/Certificate Program
2001	San Mateo County, CA	Consumer Awareness
2001	Howard County, MD	Consumer Awareness
2002	Albuquerque, NM	Consumer Awareness/Voluntary
2002	San Antonio, TX	Mandatory
2002	Onondaga County, NY	Voluntary
2002	Southampton, NY	Voluntary/Incentive Based
2002	Naperville, IL	Mandatory
2002	Pima County, AZ	Mandatory
2002	Long Beach, CA	Mandatory
2002	Iowa City, IA	Mandatory
2003	Syracuse, NY	Voluntary
2003	Bolingbrook, IL	Mandatory
2003	Escanaba, MI	Voluntary/Consumer Incentive
2003	Chicago, IL	Mandatory
2003	St. Louis County, MO	Mandatory
2004	Houston, TX	Voluntary/Incentives to Developers
2004	Pittsburgh, PA	Tax Incentive
2004	St. Petersburg, FL	Mandatory
2005	Toledo, OH	Mandatory
2005	Auburn, NY	Mandatory
2005	Prescott Valley, AZ	Voluntary
2005	Scranton, PA	Mandatory
2005	Arvada, CO	Mandatory
2006	Pittsburgh, PA	Voluntary
2007	Montgomery County, MD	Voluntary
2007	Rockford, IL	Mandatory
2007	Lafayette, CO	Mandatory
2007	Tucson, AZ	Mandatory
2007	Birmingham, AL	Mandatory

SOURCE: University of Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning; and Concrete Change.

are easily neglected in the design,” points out Caporale. “The builders learned that the financial impact was minimal and the only real costs were the altering of architectural design,” echoes Claar.

Demand for visitable homes appears to outstrip supply. A recent study conducted by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (CCDS) in Winnipeg, Canada, demonstrated a clear demand for visitable housing in Canada. For example, real estate professionals reported increased interest in no-step entrances, yet there was little or no housing stock available to meet this demand. The study also highlighted some of the major barriers to building visitable houses—a lack of education and awareness in the building and planning sectors, inaccurate perceptions of cost, and barriers in the form of certain city/town ordinances.

Visitability embodies the principle of sustainable communities in that well-designed and thoughtfully built communities provide equitable access for all citizens, conserve resources and protect environmental health, and support healthy vibrant economies. The 3Es of sustainable communities—equity, environment, and economy—are enhanced where homes are built to meet the long-term needs of a broad range of residents and where citizens have the option to remain in their communities as their physical condition changes over time.

In addition, visitability shares common ground with other urban design trends, such as new urbanism, and is positioned to take advantage of current intense public interest in alternatives to the conventional residential-only, low-density neighborhood design. For example, neotraditional neighborhoods offer many features that are compatible with the spirit of visitable communities, including compact neighborhoods where destinations are closer and more easily reached without automobiles, and homes and yards

are scaled and arranged to promote social interaction.

But, there are points of conflict between the new urbanist designs and visitability. While the public spaces of new urbanist developments are consonant with visitable neighborhoods and easily negotiable streetscapes, the private spaces—the residences themselves—often are rendered inaccessible to people with disabilities or seniors as a result of daunting entrance steps or narrow passages.

Likewise, other models, like Habitat for Humanity neighborhoods, may share design principles such as compact and walkable neighborhoods, even when individual homes present barriers at the entrances. Indeed, it was a Habitat community that first caught the eye of Concrete Change founder Eleanor Smith, who was struck by the irony of inaccessible Habitat homes, given the disproportionate representation of disabled citizens in the low-income population. The Atlanta affiliate became the first in the world to agree to build all homes as visitable, beginning in 1990, preceding even the Atlanta ordinance legislation.

Visitability advocates have worked to bridge the various urban design trends, with some success. At the urging of Concrete Change and certain forward-thinking members of the Congress for the New Urbanism, the U.S. Green Building Council recently added award points for the inclusion of visitable housing to the neighborhood design section of the LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) program.

Even where visitability becomes mainstream, whether mandated or voluntarily, a vast housing stock remains that challenges physically limited residents. This existing stock represents a potential market for home renovations or additions that meet minimum visitability requirements. Renovations in response to changing physical conditions of residents already account for perhaps

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one-quarter of remodeling dollars nationally, according to a 1999 survey by the National Association of Home Builders Remodeling Council. Although renovating for visitability is more costly than incorporating basic access at the design and construction stage, such rehab may be less expensive than the alternative of having to leave one’s home prematurely to move into an institution due to declining physical abilities.

Providing the three minimum elements of visitability does not make homes fully accessible for those with limited mobility. Nor does it satisfy those advocating for full universal design—a set of product and design standards that characterize homes that meet the needs of a broad range of different populations over entire lifetimes. However, the basic design elements of visitable homes can provide the foundation for universally designed homes. In addition, by identifying three simple, but critical elements to making homes more welcoming to visitors and residents with common physical limitations, the visitability movement helps all sectors—builders and developers, local governments, and individual citizens—focus on low-cost, low-technology, easily adopted measures to improve access and strengthen communities.

Most visitable homes have come about as the result of policy changes at the local level. The logic and relevance of major shifts in public policy often seem obvious and simple in retrospect. It is hard to remember street design before curb cuts and accessible parking. Yet, these now standard features of the urban environment are the result of hard-fought battles. Communities that adopt policies to promote the development of visitable homes open up new housing markets, for both new construction and remodeling, and may enjoy other benefits such as lower renovation costs paid with individual and public funds and fewer residents forced into institutions. At the same time, the added costs for the three visitable features are modest compared with the opportunities created for those with mobility impairments.

With the aging of baby boomers, most of whom are loathe to give up the comfort and privacy of their homes for institutional care, the dearth of visitable homes may represent a huge, potential market for developers and builders. “I say it all the time,” maintains Claar, “visitability is an idea whose time has come.” **UL**

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