

Manitobans with disabilities

VISITABLE HOUSING TOWARDS LIVABLE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

The aging of the Canadian population is a popular topic with policy experts, city planners, academics and the media. The Federal report: Canada's Aging Population (2002) estimates by 2026 nearly 20% of Canada's population will be 65+. This aging population has important implications in terms of health care, community planning, community attractions and spending patterns.

There is also recognition of a significant contribution of the older generation to our families, and to social and economic spheres in our communities and our societal responsibility to ensure meaningful participation in the community. Participation includes affordable accessible housing, accessible (and universal) community design, caregiver relationships, disability supports, leisure and volunteering opportunities, access to assistive devices and to public transportation among others. Overall, we all want to be included in planning and participate in all aspects of social and economic life of our communities. In many cases we have done well with making changes to our public spaces, however, some areas are sadly lacking attention in Canada.

One of the key areas is housing. Most people desire to remain in their own homes and communities as they age, however current housing stock and community design often prohibit this. We all want to continue to be included and include other people in our lives, but quite often we cannot even 'visit' each other in our own homes. In many private homes in Canada, we have front steps, narrow doors and bathrooms that are difficult to use – all this makes full participation difficult not only for those with disabilities but for people of all ages and abilities.

'Visitable' homes (no step entry, wider entry door and access to the bathroom on main floor) contribute to the health and well-being of not only individuals who reside in those homes. Visitable homes can open their doors to neighbours, family members and the whole community. Such homes allow people with all levels of abilities, to stay connected, interact, and expand their social networks. Visitable



Visitable house in the summer

homes also allow people with disabilities and seniors stay in their homes longer as they don't need to move out of the community to institutions, specialized housing or larger centres. This contributes significantly to economic and social stability, promotes safety and injury prevention, decreases costs on the health and home care systems and increases overall quality of life.

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. To make visitability a norm, inclusive, sustainable community leadership and approaches to community planning and the design and construction of single and multi-family homes are required. 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. Visitability encourages all sectors



Visitable house in the winter

(local government, builders, developers and individual citizens) to focus on low-cost, low-tech, easily-adopted measures to improve the housing industry, accessibility and strengthen communities.

Implementing livable, sustainable and visitable housing principles at the design and planning phase of new housing and community developments provides better integration into the natural and built environments, and results in time, cost and material savings as fewer modifications are required later on. Existing housing stock and neighbourhoods that require modifications to make them more inclusive also need to be addressed.

CCDS has developed a model for livable and inclusive communities that identifies inclusive community assessment and planning processes, as well as practices and policy principles that were recently piloted in six communities across Canada (including Rossburn and Selkirk in Manitoba). The model assists urban and rural centres to evaluate, plan and take action towards ensuring our communities can offer an improved quality of life to its residents now and in the future. There is evidence to show that visitable housing is one promising practice that will bring a community together and improve quality of life in all its members. 

For more information and to learn how your community can participate in building more livable and inclusive communities (and specifically on visitable housing), visit our website at www.disabilitystudies.ca or contact CCDS at Tel: 204 287-8411, TTY: 204 475-6223, email: ccds@disabilitystudies.ca.