



Making Our Houses Lifelong Homes

Accessible Housing
for Seniors

Continuum of barrier-free housing



Visitability

focuses on zero-step entrances, wider doors, and a main floor bathroom that make a home's first floor accessible to all



Accessibility

makes necessities in the home such as kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms accessible for people of all ages and mobility levels



FlexHousing™

incorporates features at the design and construction phase that allow people to adapt their homes to meet changing needs



Universal design

creates housing that can be used by people of all ages, abilities and mobility levels, without adaptation or specialized design

“We need to find ways to be more creative in how we can deal with the challenges created by an aging population and how we can keep people in their homes longer, and be more responsive to their needs.”

– Mayor Stephen Mandel, City of Edmonton

Foreword

On October 8th, 2009 more than 120 delegates attended a one-day event to explore the need to create more accessible housing for seniors, the importance of aging in place, and determine how to increase the availability of accessible homes in Edmonton. *Blueprint for the Next Housing Boom: The Mayor’s Roundtable for Accessible Housing and Universal Design for Seniors* brought together seniors, advocates, policy makers, academics, builders and experts to learn more about accessible housing from keynote speaker Jordana Maisel, of the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA Center) in Buffalo, New York. Participants were also invited to share their ideas about how accessible housing can create stronger communities for seniors and all Albertans. This white paper reflects the information that was shared at the roundtable and the discussions that took place among the participants. It also presents suggestions for how advocates, policy makers, builders and academics can work together to move toward creating houses that can become lifelong homes.



Executive Summary

The challenge

Canada's aging population will create an unprecedented demand for accessible housing that can accommodate the mobility challenges seniors often face. Although there are already not enough accessible or universally designed homes to meet the needs of people with limited mobility, the situation will become increasingly urgent as Canada's baby boom population reaches its senior years. It is anticipated that by 2036, seniors will make up almost one-quarter of Canada's population. In Edmonton, according to the most recent statistics, it is projected that the number of people aged 65 and older will double over the next twenty years.

Understanding accessible housing

Accessible housing and universally designed homes include features that allow people of varying mobility levels to live independently, including features like zero-step entries, wider hallways and doorways to accommodate wheelchairs or walkers, and bathrooms, kitchens and bedrooms that are accessible by everyone. These homes offer immense societal and economic benefits, reducing the costs to our health care system and allowing seniors and others with mobility challenges to retain their independence and dignity and "age in place" in their own homes.

Homes that are inaccessible may pose substantial health and safety hazards that can result in serious injuries and create a substantial strain on public health services. In 2008 alone, falls by seniors cost the Province of Alberta \$96 million. Accessible housing and universally designed homes reduce the



need for long-term care beds, allowing seniors to remain in their homes as long as possible, while also making it easier for people of any age to return home sooner after an illness or injury.

Making it happen

Until recently, many builders, architects and designers have been resistant to the idea of building more accessible housing, as they believe that the costs involved in building these homes are substantially greater than traditional homes. In truth, when included in initial design and construction, the costs are virtually the same. At the same time, many consumers are unaware of the features that are available, or of the myriad health, economic and social benefits accessible housing and universal design offer.

Meeting the growing demand for accessible housing will require a concerted effort from municipal, provincial and federal governments, as well as from industry, academia, advocates and seniors. The creation of a multi-sectoral action group that can help create policies, introduce education initiatives and develop implementation strategies to increase both the availability of accessible housing and universally designed homes is an essential next step in helping all Edmontonians build housing that can become lifelong homes.

“We’ve been building senior-oriented housing for a while, but we’re focusing more attention on it now because we realize that seniors are becoming a greater piece of our market share. As we develop new housing, we’re working to figure out how to design these places so that people can age in the right place as long as possible.”

– Bard Golightly
Chief Operating Officer, Christenson Developments

The Challenge

An Aging Population

It should come as no surprise that Canada is getting older. Fueled by aging baby boomers, declining birth rates, and longer life expectancy, Canada’s population is older than ever before. According to the 2006 Statistics Canada report *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*, in 2005 there were 4.2 million seniors in Canada, accounting for 13.2 per cent of the population. By 2036 that number is expected to increase to 9.8 million, with seniors accounting for 24.5 per cent of Canada’s population. This means that almost one-quarter of our country’s population will be 65 and older. In Edmonton, it is expected that the number of seniors will more than double over the next twenty years. And by 2015, for the first time ever, the number of seniors in Canada could exceed the number of children.

Canada’s baby boom generation – those born between 1946 and 1964 – is driving much of that demographic change. Boomers, who in 2006 represented nearly one in three Canadians, will start turning 65 in 2011. Over the past six decades, boomers have driven many societal changes, including the building of schools and the creation of subdivisions throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. As a group, they have profoundly changed society’s religious, economic, sexual and political mores. Many sociologists predict that their impact on society’s understanding of aging and their demand for services and supports that meet their changing needs will be equally dramatic.

Changing needs

As more and more Canadians enter their senior years, the physical changes that come with aging will create increasing challenges. Seniors today are living longer than ever before, and while an increase in life expectancy is a positive outcome, health and mobility limitations can profoundly impact a senior’s quality of life. Some experts describe it as “living longer, but with lessened abilities.”

According to Statistics Canada, among those aged 65 and older who needed help to move within their home, 15 per cent reported being either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with life in general. This compared to only 3 per cent of those who could move independently within their home.

This same study found that mobility issues increase with age, with 47 per cent of seniors over the age of 85 reporting that they either cannot walk or require wheelchairs, walkers or support from others. Not surprisingly, institutional residency – when people can no longer live in their own residence but instead must live in nursing homes or other institutions – also rises with age, with 32 per cent of people aged 85 and older living in institutions as compared to only 2 per cent of those aged 65-74.

By 2015, for the first time ever, the number of seniors in Canada could exceed the number of children.

“I’ve been in this house since 1952, and so far I can manage on my own. I have a bathroom, bedroom, living room and kitchen on the main floor and I do fine with my walker. But I have five steps at the front and back entrances, and stairs to go down to my basement, and I need help with that. I’d love to be able to go for a walk in the summer, but without someone to help me get down the stairs it’s just not possible.”

– Helen Harry (age 90), Edmonton Senior

Barriers in the home

Anecdotal evidence tells us that for many seniors, one of the biggest challenges of aging is the myriad of physical limitations that may develop. As people begin to experience mobility issues that necessitate the use of wheelchairs or walkers, or make climbing stairs challenging, their existing homes may no longer meet their needs or may make it difficult to maintain their independence. Too often, the simple act of entering or exiting their home becomes impossible because of stairs and steps at both the exterior and interior of their home’s entrance. Homeowners are forced to either construct ramps or rely on caregivers to carry them in and out of their home every time they need to come or go. This not only leads to social isolation, but also contributes to a more sedentary lifestyle.

Once in their home, structural barriers such as flights of stairs, narrow doorways and hallways, countertops and light switches that are too high to be reached from a wheelchair, and doorknobs that are difficult to grasp or turn can make it difficult to perform even basic tasks. Although some of these challenges can be addressed with modifications such as ramps, chair lifts or widened doorways, other barriers such as bedrooms, bathrooms, or kitchens on different levels of the home may prove more problematic. Likewise, toilets and tubs within bathrooms that do not have adequate space for wheelchairs may be both inaccessible and potentially dangerous. Instead, people are often forced to rely on other methods of personal hygiene¹ such as commodes or sponge baths, and to count on

family or paid caregivers for meal preparation and other daily necessities. And these challenges are not limited to seniors. People of any age may experience accidents or illness – either temporary or permanent – that can make their own homes inaccessible and eventually unlivable.

The health and safety consequences of these structural barriers can be severe. Not only are seniors vulnerable to injuries, including falls, while trying to go about their daily tasks in homes that are ill-equipped to meet their needs, but in the event of a fire they could also be literally trapped in their own homes. Fire departments and first responders have expressed concern about the dangers that exist for seniors who live in homes that are not accessible, and have encouraged builders to ensure their designs allow for evacuation and to utilize materials that delay the spread of fire.



¹AARP Public Policy Institute (2008) *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*

“Ask yourself what would happen if your parent had a stroke. Could they still come for a visit? Or would your home be inaccessible? Imagine not being able to have your mother over for New Years dinner because she can’t make it up the steps to your house or can’t get her wheelchair into your bathroom.”

– Isabel Henderson, Vice-President, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital

Lifelong homes

In recent years, urban planners, architects and advocacy groups have devoted considerable time and attention to exploring the benefits of visitability, accessibility and universal design. Visitability, or visitable housing, focuses on allowing people with varying levels of ability to enter and use the first floor of a home. Accessibility is broader than visitability and focuses on making more features within the home more accessible to those with physical limitations. Universal design aims to create housing and environments that can be accessed and used by people of all ages, abilities and mobility levels. The ultimate goal for these design approaches is to allow seniors to “age in place,” so that they can remain in their own homes and as part of their existing communities for as long possible.

Although the focus of the October 8th Mayor’s Roundtable was on the needs of seniors, it is clear that visitability, accessibility and universal design offer benefits to people of all ages and abilities. No matter what our own age or physical limitations, we all likely know a friend or loved one who could benefit from visitability features like zero-step entries and bathrooms on the main floor of the home. Without these basic features, it may eventually become impossible for people to welcome friends and relatives with mobility issues into their homes.



“My children all live far away and I love that my home is big enough for my family to visit me all at once – I just can’t imagine not being able to do that. I’ve been in this home for 45 years and I have fabulous neighbours that I know and trust, who come over to clean my eaves or trim branches. I’ll stay here as long as I am physically able, because being able to choose where you live is the most important thing.”

– Arlene Meldrum, Edmonton Senior

Understanding Accessible Housing

The value of aging in place

Surveys and anecdotal evidence have repeatedly shown that seniors want to remain in their own homes as long as possible. Like most people, seniors value their privacy and independence and wish to continue living in familiar surroundings as long as their health and mobility will allow. In a recent report, the Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) cited a study that indicated 85 per cent of people aged 55 and older planned to stay in their home, even if their health or mobility declined.

Researchers have found that aging in place offers many social, financial and emotional benefits,² and that living independently in one’s own home promotes health, life satisfaction and self-esteem – key indicators for successful aging. Relocation, whether to a more accessible home, or to an institutional setting such as an assisted living facility or nursing home, can be difficult for many seniors. Not only do they give up their home and familiar surroundings, but they often leave behind the neighbours, services and supports that comprise their community. *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada* indicates that seniors are more likely than younger people to report a stronger sense of belonging to their local community. This sense of belonging has been identified as an important contributor to health for people of all ages. Helping our seniors age in place allows them to remain in the homes they know, in the communities they trust, as long as possible.

Conversely, seniors who are not able to age in place, but are instead forced to leave their home for more accessible single-family dwellings, multi-family housing or institutional care, often experience increased stress and worry. During her October 8th presentation, Jordana Maisel noted that some U.S. studies have indicated that one-third of older adults reported being concerned about being forced into nursing homes because of barriers in their current homes.³ And there are multiple studies that demonstrate the negative impact stress can have on both physical and mental health.

Seniors who must leave their home due to failing health or mobility challenges, often leave a spouse or partner behind in the family home. These forced separations can have a tremendous emotional impact, as people who have spent much of their lives together find themselves living in separate residences. Called quasi-widowhood by some researchers, this separation can leave the community-dwelling spouse feeling alone and abandoned. It can also create logistical challenges, such as being able to travel between the home and the facility, and financial hardship, as couples struggle to pay the costs of supporting both a personal residence and institutional care.

²Statistics Canada (2006) *A Portrait of Seniors in Canada*

³ Jordana Maisel (2009) Presentation at “Blueprint for the Next Housing Boom: The Mayor’s Roundtable for Accessible Housing and Universal Design for Seniors”

“I’m really impressed with the language of visitability and how inclusive it is – it’s not about only seniors or the disabled, but about everyone. I think moving toward a language that’s more inclusive is very encouraging.”

– Maxine Cowan, Architect

Features of accessible design

Understanding what accessible design means is not always easy. In the sidebar on this page we explain the differences between visitability, accessibility, FlexHousing™ and universal design. During her October 8th presentation at *Blueprint for the Next Housing Boom: The Mayor’s Roundtable for Accessible Housing and Universal Design for Seniors*, keynote speaker Jordana Maisel discussed some of the features that define each of the categories, and explained the philosophy behind universal design.

Universal design is about more than housing or products – it’s about creating an environment that is useable by every member of society. Universal design promotes independence and social participation, and avoids stigma, segregation and isolation. Its principles include such ideas as equitable use, flexible use, solutions that are simple and intuitive, information that is easy to understand, a tolerance for error, and low physical effort. Universal design incorporates features that are suitable for every stage of life, and are adaptable as needs change. Although universal design is the ultimate goal that builders and policy makers should be striving toward, visitability is often more achievable.

In this paper we use the terms universal design and accessible housing when referring to the type of housing that we believe will allow us to build houses that can become lifelong homes.

Visitability, accessibility, FlexHousing™ and universal design

Visitability is a design strategy that focuses on three main features within a home – a zero-step entrance, wider doors, and a bathroom on the main floor – that allow people with disabilities, including seniors with limited mobility, to enter the first floor of a home.



Accessibility is broader than visitability and applies to a variety of products, including housing. Accessible housing is intended to make features within the home accessible for people of all ages and mobility levels. With accessible housing, people can access most of the necessities within a house, including the kitchen, bathroom and bedroom.



FlexHousing™ is a term used by CMHC to describe an approach to housing design that incorporates features at the design and construction phase that will allow homeowners to adapt their space to meet their changing needs. In the U.S. this is also known as “adaptable design.”



Universal design is a relatively new concept that goes beyond mere visitability and accessibility and aims to create housing and environments that can be used by people of all ages, abilities and mobility levels, without the need for adaptation or specialized design. Universal design focuses on creating homes that are comfortable, attractive, safe and usable by everyone at every stage of life.



“There are 450,000 Albertans with disabilities, but as people age our issues are becoming everyone’s issues – especially housing. If we can design housing so that everyone can use them, we’re going to create more accessible communities. We’re not going to be socially isolating people and we’re also going to take pressure off the health care system because people can get out of hospital and go back home.”

– Marlin Styner, Premier’s Council Chair, Seniors and Community Supports, Disability Supports Division

The Case for Universal Design and Accessible Housing



When it comes to being faced with either relocating or renovating their home to make it more accessible, seniors are not alone. People of any age can face barriers in their homes due to accident, illness or disability. Even something as seemingly mundane as a broken leg may make it difficult for otherwise healthy adults to remain in their own home, at least temporarily.

Homes that are built to include features of visitability, accessible design or universal design can accommodate the changing needs of the homeowner at every stage of life. These features make it possible to welcome friends and loved ones of varying mobility levels, including seniors who rely on wheelchairs or walkers. At the same time, features such as zero-step entries and wider doorways allow parents with young children in strollers to come and go with ease. Zero-step entries also make it easier for movers or delivery people to bring large items in and out of the home.

Even something as seemingly mundane as a broken leg may make it difficult for otherwise healthy adults to remain in their own home, at least temporarily.

The cost of accessible housing

One of the concerns builders often voice when discussing visitability or accessible housing is the cost involved in incorporating these features into new home construction. Although some design features, such as elevators or roll-in showers are more expensive than others, many of the basic visitability features are relatively inexpensive when builders and consumers plan ahead. In many instances, a zero-step entry adds only a couple of hundred dollars to the cost of construction. Likewise, including a main floor bathroom, wider doorways and wider hallways at the design phase adds only nominal costs to construction. And when included in the design and planning, these visitability elements can be both attractive and functional.

The costs of remodeling or renovating homes can often be more expensive because builders are working within the constraints of an existing structure. A basic renovation, including widening doorways, adding ramps and replacing tubs with accessible showers can range anywhere from \$8,000 to \$15,000 or more. Although some of these costs may be eligible for assistance through grants such as CMHC’s Residential Rehabilitation Assistance Program for Persons with Disabilities and the Home Adaptation for Seniors Independence program, depending on the original structure of the home, renovation costs may be prohibitive.

These costs, whether incurred during new construction or as part of a renovation, pale in comparison to the costs involved when seniors are injured in their home, admitted to hospital and/or forced to enter nursing home care prematurely.

“When you have an illness or injury or onset of the mobilization challenges that come with age, your situation changes dramatically. It’s a trauma, and then you face the trauma of trying to find another place to live because you can’t stay in your comfort zone, or where your support networks are. And that’s not healthy for anybody.”

– Marlin Styner, Premier’s Council Chair, Seniors and Community Supports, Disability Supports Division

The cost of inaccessibility

Barriers within the home are more than inconvenient – they can also result in social isolation, stress and even an increased risk of injury to seniors, including serious falls within the home.

According to a September 28, 2004 article in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, in 1999/2000 falls accounted for 85 per cent of the 73,113 injury-related admissions among people over 65 years old. It is estimated that one in three seniors living in the community will experience a fall each year, and when they do it can result in disabilities, loss of independence and even death.

In Alberta, falls are a serious public health issue. In their report *Seniors’ Falls Injuries in Alberta*, the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research notes that seniors have nine times more fall injuries than younger populations, and that one in three seniors living in the community will experience a fall each year. The report explains that in 2006 falls among seniors aged 65 and older accounted for 6,915 hospital admissions and 18,623 emergency department visits. That same report also indicates that in 2008 Alberta spent \$96 million on seniors’ falls, and that by the year 2031 that number is expected to reach \$228 million. The average cost of a hospital admission as a result of a fall is \$15,500.⁴

In 2008, Alberta Health Services released *Aging in the Right Place*, which details the need for increasing continuing care. It notes that, “In 2008, 14,500 seniors and persons with disabilities live in Alberta long-term care facilities at any one time. Many more reside in hospital beds awaiting long-term care beds.

Without more alternatives, Alberta would need an additional 15,000 long-term care beds over the next 20 years. That’s 750 beds annually or more than four new facilities per year.”⁵ Instead, the Government of Alberta has proposed a continuing care strategy that would offer more choices to Albertans so that they can continue to age in their homes and communities. As part of this, the government intends to create new home-care services, support programs, and health practices to create alternatives to facility-based institutional care.

Although accessible housing is not specifically mentioned within the continuing care strategy, it will undoubtedly play an important role in making those alternatives viable and affordable. Investing in accessible housing today will reduce the future costs of building more long-term care facilities. It will also allow people to return home sooner after experiencing illness or injury – alleviating financial pressure on our health care system in the here and now.

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⁴Alberta Centre for Injury Control & Research (2009) *Seniors’ Falls Injuries in Alberta*

⁵Alberta Health Services (2008) *Continuing Care Strategy Aging in the Right Place*

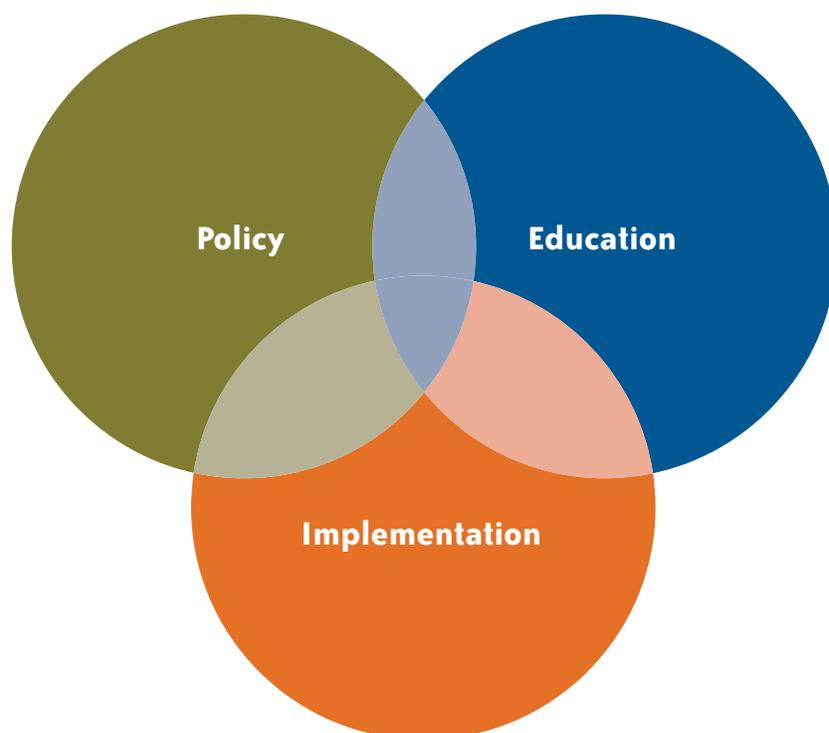
Making It Happen

Even though urban planners and advocates for seniors and the disabled have embraced the benefits of accessible housing and universal design, not everyone is as supportive. In her presentation, Jordana Maisel explained that in moving toward implementing visitability and accessible housing in the U.S., there has been resistance from builders and contractors, as well as from policy makers who are faced with regulations that limit what can be legislated at a municipal level.

Here in Canada there have been similar issues, as well as challenges that are created by the lack of national standards or mandated policies and guidelines, especially around residential homes. As it stands right now, each province must create its own approach to visitability and accessible housing.

There have been some notable Canadian successes, including Ontario's Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (2005), the Atlantic Seniors Housing Research Alliance and the first North American Visitability Think Tank, which was held in Winnipeg in May 2007 to discuss best practices, gaps, trends and issues. But more needs to be done, and we need to begin by working with builders, policy makers and the general public.

Based on the comments and suggestions made by participants at the Mayor's Roundtable, it is clear there are three key thematic areas that will drive the creation of more accessible housing – policy, education and implementation. Each of these areas is essential in allowing us to make our houses lifelong homes.



Policy

In a perfect world, builders would simply begin building homes that incorporate universal design or accessible design features, and consumers would begin purchasing them with the intent of aging in place. In the real world, policy initiatives at the municipal, provincial and federal level will be required for any measurable change in the availability of accessible housing.

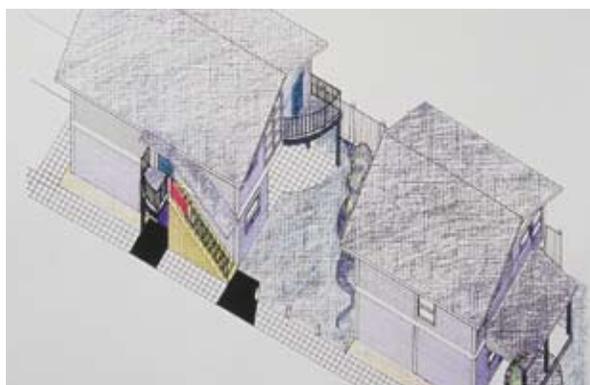
Although it is difficult to know exactly what those policies should look like, we know from previous experience that policies are often most effective when they begin as guidelines, which eventually become standards that can be enforced. This approach allows for consultation with interested groups, and makes it possible for industry to lead the development and implementation of guidelines and standards. It also allows for the collection of statistics, data and cost information that can persuade other groups to voluntarily adopt guidelines.

In the case of universal design and accessible housing, there are compelling reasons for all three levels of government to begin developing policies that will encourage construction. From a financial perspective, investing in universal design and accessible housing today will result in long-term savings, as more people can age in place, reducing the demand for long-term care institutions. From a societal impact perspective, investing in universal design and accessible housing allows people to remain in their own communities longer, which supports personal independence and creates stronger communities.

Any policies relating to universal design and accessible housing will likely require a mix of incentives for builders and consumers, and legislation or zoning practices to see new home construction that includes these features. In the U.S. some communities have offered such builder incentives as reduced fees and permit waivers, and consumer incentives such as rebates or tax credits.

Although most builders favour incentives, research out of the U.S. indicates that legislation is often the most effective way to increase the number of new homes that include visitability or accessible housing features. In communities such as Bolingbrook, Illinois and Pima County, Arizona mandatory ordinances dramatically increased the number of visitable homes that were created. At present, there are 57 state and local initiatives that have been adopted in the U.S., with 33 that are mandatory and 24 that are voluntary.⁶

Municipal, provincial and federal governments can utilize existing mechanisms and processes to consult with and provide direction to industry. The creation of an organization that represents groups and individuals with an interest in accessible housing will provide valuable guidance and insight into the development of necessary policies.



⁶AARP Public Policy Institute (2008) *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*

“This subject really resonates with me. I actually bought an accessible home myself ten years ago because I wanted my mother to be able to come and stay with me... I just think it’s a good idea at any age.”

– Angela Sekulic, Supervisor, Occupational Therapy, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital

Education

Consumer demand is what will ultimately drive the availability of accessible housing. If consumers ask for it, contractors will build it and universally designed housing will become a more mainstream part of new home construction. Before that can happen, consumers need to understand the benefits of universal design, what features are available, and the minimal costs involved when building new homes. They need to understand the importance of making homes visitable for friends and family, the value of aging in place, and why we should all begin planning today for tomorrow’s needs. Most importantly, they need to recognize their own mortality and accept that their needs will change as they age.

This last point is likely the hardest sell for most consumers. Many people are uncomfortable with the realities of aging, and prefer to believe that they will never deal with any of the mobility issues that most seniors experience. In many instances people are uncomfortable even contemplating the idea of aging, and prefer instead to deal with it when the time arrives. Even the most pragmatic person may have difficulty imagining themselves as someday needing mobility supports. That is why it is important to show consumers the advantages of accessible design in the here and now. Features that will allow them to welcome aging parents, or disabled friends are immediately relatable. So are features that would be useful in the event of a temporary disability, such as a broken leg. It may also be helpful to demonstrate the financial benefits of including accessible design elements in their new home construction, by showing them how it can increase the resale value.

The link between accessibility and sustainability may also be a persuasive message for some consumers. Just recently, the organization *Concrete Change* began working with the U.S. Green Building Council’s Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) to create a LEED rating for incorporating basic access into single-family homes. Eventually, visitability could become an important element in determining a home’s LEED rating.

It is also important to undertake education efforts with builders, both in terms of the potential opportunities and benefits of building this type of housing, and to dispel the myths that exist about the costs involved in creating accessible housing. Many believe that universal design and accessible housing is too expensive, and that there is little demand for these types of features. In her research, Jordana Maisel and her team interviewed a number of builders involved in building visitable and accessible housing and discovered that the additional costs involved in including visitability features in new home construction are minimal. For instance, the cost of a zero-step entry on a slab built home in the United States can add as little as \$100-200 dollars extra to the cost of construction. Although the cost of building a zero-step home on a house with a basement is somewhat higher – in the range of \$500 – it is still an affordable feature in most homes. Other costs, such as doors that fit in wider doorways, cost as little as \$2 more than standard doors.

Here in Canada, those costs are equally reasonable. According to a 2002 CMHC report on FlexHousing™, the costs associated with including FlexHousing™ options in new home construction are only about 5 per cent higher than the costs associated with traditional housing.⁷

⁷CMHC (2002) Cost of FlexHousing™

“We need to use advertising to create a demand for accessible housing. People need to see accessible housing as being something we want, not something we’re stuck with.”

– Roberta Bedard, Seniors Outreach Worker, Mill Woods Seniors Centre, and Member of the Consumer Advisory Committee, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital

As Jordana Maisel explains it, the key for builders and consumers to keep costs down, is to plan ahead. “When you plan early, the costs go down, and you can get better designs.”⁸

In addition to educating consumers and builders, it is also important to share information on universal design and accessible housing with other stakeholders, such as real estate agents, lenders (including banks and mortgage brokers), academics (including those that teach industrial design and architecture), and urban planners. These groups play an important role in influencing consumer understanding of the benefits of accessible housing, and supporting the creation of more accessible housing in the Canadian market.

Although it is too early to determine which education activities would be most effective, a combination of public awareness advertising, industry outreach, research coordination and tours or demonstrations may prove most effective.

Even the most pragmatic person may have difficulty imagining themselves as someday needing mobility supports. That is why it is important to show consumers the advantages of accessible design in the here and now. Features that will allow them to welcome aging parents, or disabled friends are immediately relatable. So are features that would be useful in the event of a temporary disability, such as a broken leg.

FlexHouse Costing Summary

New Construction Costs

	Increases	Total Cost
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Benchmark

Total Cost		\$ 143,072
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Basic FlexHouse™ (adaptable and accessible)

Cost of Upgrades	\$ 7,833	
Cost of Basic FlexHouse™		\$ 150,905

Renovation Costs

	Increases	Total Cost
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Basic FlexHouse™ to Full FlexHouse™

Cost to Renovate	\$ 74,605	
Original Cost of Basic FlexHouse™	\$ 150,905	
Total Cost after Renovation		\$ 225,510

Benchmark House to Full FlexHouse™

Estimated Cost to Renovate	\$ 150,000	
Original Cost of the Benchmark	\$ 143,072	
Total Cost after Renovation		\$ 293,072

Source: CMHC (2002) Cost of FlexHousing™

⁸Jordana Maisel (2009) Presentation at “Blueprint for the Next Housing Boom: The Mayor’s Roundtable for Accessible Housing and Universal Design for Seniors”

“We’ve been talking about accessible housing for thirty years, but I think our aging population will be what finally pushes us to get it done. Baby boomers actually have the money and the influence to make things happen. They won’t just accept that nursing homes are part of their future – they will demand something different.”

– Ron Wickman, Architect

Implementation



As Canada’s baby boom generation ages, the availability of universal design and accessible housing will likely increase simply to keep pace with demand. Baby boomers have tremendous buying power, as evidenced by their influence over most of the consumer trends that have dominated the past fifty years. From mini-vans to luxury goods, baby boomers’ buying habits have driven the creation of new products and services in every decade that they have been alive. According to the MetLife Mature Market Institute, U.S. baby boomers have an estimated buying power of \$2.1 trillion a year. And when those boomers begin to demand universal design and accessible housing features, builders will have to deliver. Builders that begin preparing now to meet that need could become industry leaders.

In moving toward implementing policies and education strategies, it is important to utilize existing resources and processes. Builders can

begin to explore the best practices that exist both for universal design and accessibility features in new home construction, and remodeling or renovation projects. The IDEA Center and other organizations have created plan books that detail how to build comfortable, safe, and affordable visitable and accessible homes. At the same time, there are several resources, including www.homeforlife.info that can help builders find suppliers, architects and other professionals who understand accessible housing.

Likewise, policy makers and advocates can utilize existing research that has been compiled both in the US and Canada on the benefits of universal design and accessible housing. In the U.S., the IDEA Center, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), the National Association of Home Builders and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development have undertaken important research on accessible housing and the needs of seniors. Here in Canada, organizations such as the CMHC (www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca), the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies (www.visitablehousingcanada.com) and the Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research (www.acicr.ualberta.ca) all have a wealth of research information that is available for public use.

Implementing necessary policies and strategies will require extensive consultation, coordinated teamwork and dynamic leadership. Although there are many agencies that are involved in seniors’ issues and accessible housing, it is important that there be an organization dedicated specifically to advancing the availability of universal design and accessible housing. Alberta has the expertise, the experience and the passion to take on that challenge, and to create a model that provinces across the country could follow.

“I teach this interdisciplinary course on accessible design – and I’ve sometimes felt frustrated because we maybe get one student each year that actually goes into the accessible design field. But today I was reminded how important educating the future generation is and I feel like we really are making a difference.”

– Lili Liu, Professor and Chair, Department of Occupational Therapy,
Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine, University of Alberta

Next Steps

In preparation for the October 8th, 2009 Mayor’s Roundtable, organizers spent considerable time reviewing the available research on universal design and accessible housing, and discussing issues, approaches and strategies with keynote speaker Jordana Maisel. Based on this information, and the ideas and suggestions made by participants during the breakout sessions, organizers are recommending the establishment of a multi-sectoral action group on accessible housing and universal design. This action group should include representatives from a broad cross-section of advocates, policy makers, builders, experts and academics who can bring varied experiences and perspectives to the committee. Suggested representation should include:

- Academics
- Developers/Builders
- City of Edmonton
- Alberta Health Services
- Alberta Seniors and Community Supports
- CMHC
- Alberta Council of Persons with Disabilities
- Architects
- Greater Edmonton Home Builders Association
- Alberta Real Estate Board
- Researchers
- Seniors’ agencies
- Seniors
- Fire department
- Seniors Housing

In order to ensure that the action group is able to begin building essential policy, knowledge and implementation strategies, we recommend the following timeline:

- Establish the multi-sectoral action group by Fall 2010
- Create terms of reference and goals for the action group by December 2010
- Begin focused discussion with industry, academic and advocacy representatives by January 2011
- Create preliminary strategies and recommendations by Spring 2011

We also recommend that the action group release regular status updates to inform stakeholders about important milestones and invite public participation whenever appropriate.



“A conference like this is a major undertaking and an important step, and a lot of countries haven’t gone this far. From what I can see, Edmonton has champions – advocates, policy makers, academics and builders who are incredibly supportive of accessible housing and that’s to your advantage in seeing change happen.”

– Jordana Maisel, Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (IDEA Center), Buffalo, New York

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Our deepest thanks to the Mayor of the City of Edmonton, Stephen Mandel, for his commitment to creating the kind of accessible housing for seniors that will allow all of us to make our houses our lifelong homes. We also extend our sincere gratitude to our keynote speaker, Jordana Maisel, for coming to Edmonton to share her experience, insight and advice on how to move the issue of accessible housing from discussion into action. Finally, our thanks to the organizing committee that worked tirelessly to plan, deliver and facilitate the roundtable and oversee the creation of this white paper.

Committee Members

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- Ron Wickman, Architect
- Roger Laing, Executive Director, Seniors Association of Greater Edmonton
- Doug Knight, Knight Research Ltd.
- Isabel Henderson, Vice-President, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital
- Carol Wilson, Education Coordinator, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital
- Grace Maier, Director, Specialized Geriatrics, Glenrose Rehabilitation Hospital



Appendix



Features of accessible homes

Attendees at *Blueprint for the Next Housing Boom: The Mayor's Roundtable for Accessible Housing and Universal Design for Seniors* were given the opportunity to attend breakout sessions examining specific questions. One group was asked to describe the characteristics of accessible housing, and provided the following responses:

- First floors that offer:
 - kitchen facilities
 - bedrooms
 - laundry facilities
 - washrooms
- Hard flooring surfaces
- Large enough turning radiuses
- Wider hallways and doorways
- Sensors for lights
- Grab bars in washrooms

Encouraging construction of accessible housing

During one of the breakout sessions, participants explored the question of how to address barriers and encourage the construction of more accessible housing for seniors. Some of their suggested strategies include:

- Educate consumers about benefits of accessible housing
- Create a centralized resource centre (with information on how to access government money – includes networking/blogs)
- May not always be practical to stay in homes – focus on staying in communities
- Marketing homes to be desirable/trendy
- Having universally designed homes cost the same
- Launch an advertising campaign (benefits/business case/appeal to all) utilize television, newspapers, etc.
- Create incentives for consumers, builders, etc.
- Legislation (i.e. visitability)
- Education on examples of good design
- Making the issue personal for everyone (business case – saving money)
- Get beyond minimums – strive for best practice
- Advocacy creates awareness/markets create movement (inclusive language)
- Penalties if it is not followed/inspection during building
- Universally trained staff (city staff)
- Move beyond silos/professional training and interdisciplinary teams

Implementing barrier free policies and guidelines

One of the questions posed to participants during the breakout sessions was “what can be done to implement barrier free policies and guidelines?” Some of their suggestions included:

- Offer a reduction in mortgage (new and renovated)
- Consider guidelines as a living entity
- Encoded in Building Code (take out exception on single homes)
- Clarify definitions in statutory planning documents
- Create enforcement body
- Offer incentives for building to builder and consumer
- More dialogue with consumer – sales team
- Building permit – educate city employees about requirements
- Encourage dialogue between city departments
- Emphasize integration before legislation
- Enhance access to information
- Offer Zoning incentives (more density of accessible revitalization activities)
- Create resources for addressing accessibility issues
 - government body centralized organization
 - 1-800-number central
 - CMHC with regional offices
 - provincial
 - municipal



Creating Demand for Accessible Housing

One of the responses builders often give when asked why they don't build more accessible housing is that there is currently little demand for it. During one breakout session, participants were asked to share ideas on how to create more demand for accessible housing, and posed the following ideas:

- Just going to happen (demographic change will demand it)
- Builders should create show homes that meet specifications and are affordable with signs to inform about accessibility features
- Build lottery prize homes to accessible design specifications to showcase features
- Partner with Holmes on Homes and other TV shows
- Mainstream the message
- Offer Home and Garden Show/Real Estate training
- Provide incentives from government
- Provide good designs to builders
- Create bylaws or policies – such as a certain percentage of homes in a new development must be accessible housing
- Disciplines crossing boundaries (e.g. occupational therapists signing off on plans)
- Promote intergenerational housing
- Policy development – extra suites
- Connect to environmental concepts
- Find the right spokesperson
- Encourage agents to promote universal design features
- Ongoing media attention
- Tour of universal design (like Home and Garden tours)
- Establish awards program
- Booth at renovation shows
- Incorporate accessible design element into secondary and post-secondary courses
- Focus on safety and ability to stay in homes longer (all ages)



100-day challenge

All of the participants in the breakout sessions were asked to identify what they would do over the next 100 days to create more awareness and understanding of universal design and accessible housing. These are some of their ideas:

- Discuss with spouse new design changes to final home (retirement)
- Read resources presented to be more knowledgeable of current work
- Call firms doing renovations and enquire if they have information on this type of housing renovation
- Invite design students to tour our building
- Continue to promote the benefits of accessibility and the disadvantages and costs of inaccessibility
- Introduce a universal design project for students
- Contractors – analyze what they can do better
- Familiarize self with research
- Establish mechanism to identify participants and continue to network
- Encourage everyone to share information
- Learn more about good work already done – not reinvent the wheel
- Continue to use media presence to promote awareness of accessibility issues
- Increase knowledge re: universal design options, concepts, etc.
- Invitation list to include wider representation at universal design presentations and at smart condo think tank
- Have serious discussions about accessibility and universal design with family, friends and colleagues
- Make a point of asking for universal design when we purchase our retirement home
- More probing questions by Planning Departments – personal contact
- Message the builders about \$\$ opportunities
- Spread awareness for small steps
- Share research and information from CMHC
- Encourage self-advocacy from disabled group
- Architectural guidelines in progress
- RAMP up RAMP
- Start up construction firm
- Plans for an accessible housing symposium in Calgary
- Talk to architects about new development
- Talk to my realtor to do a presentation to her group
- Have coffee with a city councilor to help build awareness of the issue and press for bylaws

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Photos provided by Ron Wickman, Architect and The City of Edmonton

