



By Jeffrey Kerr



# Is Your Home Visitable?

*The terms accessibility, universal design and barrier free living are becoming more standard in our descriptions of the homes we live in. But consider the visitors to your home – a home where no one currently has a disability.*

**Y**our home may not need to be barrier free for your current needs, but is your home “visitable” for others?

Ask yourself if you could invite a family member or friend to your home if that person used a wheelchair? Too often the answer is no.

According to Visitable Housing Canada, a visitable home has been designed with basic accessibility taken into account. It is a home that provides easy access on the main level for everyone.

A visitable home provides a welcoming environment for visitors of all ages and mobility – including guests who may use a walker, wheelchair or scooter, have a baby carriage or stroller, and visitors who may be carrying large or heavy items.

There are three basic elements to a visitable home:

1. An entrance at the front, side or back of the home that is free of steps.
2. Wider doorways – at least 36 inches – and clear passage from room to room on the main floor.
3. A powder room or main bathroom that can be accessed by visitors who use mobility devices.

Traditionally homes were not built with a long-term view of the end user. Fortunately today, more and more homes are being built with accessibility and barrier free design in mind. For older homes, home modifications can be made to meet the changing needs of family members and their visitors.

Visitable Housing was first introduced in North America in 1986. Eleanor Smith and a group of advocates for people with physical disabilities were involved in a Habitat for Humanity housing development in Atlanta. Some of the new homes incorporated best practices for accessibility, but residents soon learned that although their own homes were perfect for their needs, they could not visit their neighbours who had stairs at the entranceways and inaccessible bathrooms. Change began at the grassroots level and it is now an international movement.

The push for more visitability in our homes makes even more sense when you consider some basic statistics:

- One in six Canadians has a disability.
- One third of all Canadians aged 65 years or over has a mobility disability.
- Older adults aged 65 years and over account for more than 14% of the Canadian population.

And these numbers do not take into account the number of young families who have a variety of strollers and riding toys for their children.

The vision of the Visitability movement is to promote awareness in creating more inclusive communities where *everyone* can visit their families, friends and neighbours – *without barriers*.

The trend has been gaining attention throughout the U.S., Australia, U.K., some European countries, and now Canada. However, more work is needed to encourage new homebuilders to begin removing architectural barriers more consistently. The goal is to increase awareness of the issues; ensuring new homebuilders see their designs for everyone, not just a percentage of the population.

A home that is renovated with visitability in mind becomes more valuable in the long term. As the homeowners themselves age, the changes for visitability also support aging at home. Anyone with a mobility disability will be less likely to have to move to an assisted living setting when their homes are equipped with some accessibility features. And a home that has been renovated for visitability will have a higher real estate value, since there is a lack of housing stock with basic accessibility features in Canada.

Canadians with disabilities have to overcome many barriers. A home that is designed to be visitable promotes a sense of independence and control for both homeowners as they age and their visiting friends and family. It is a movement whose time has come – and a good real estate investment.

For more information on buying and selling wheel friendly / barrier-free real estate, please contact:

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