



## “Understanding the Status of Visitability in Canada” Research Highlight: August 16, 2007

### RESEARCH HIGHLIGHT

#### *“Understanding Visitability in Canada”*

##### Introduction

The Canadian Centre on Disability Studies carried out the project “Understanding the Status of Visitability in Canada” from August 2006-August 2007 due to the recognition of the need for research on visitable housing: a new approach to market rate housing that is occurring in many parts of the world. CCDS also recognized that there had been no collection of information on initiatives and interest regarding visitable or visitable-like housing in Canada and no previous attempts to begin to systematically understand barriers and facilitators to its acceptance in Canada nor had any sort of dialogue in Canada occurred. This project was jointly funded by CMHC and the Government of Manitoba, Department of Housing and Family Services.

This project produced the first Canadian website on visitable housing, the first Canadian survey on visitable housing and the first Canadian Think Tank on the subject. It also served as one of the first project to link visitable housing to livable communities and to sustainability concepts. It also served to begin to build capacity and to begin to build resources on visitability for the first time in Canada.

##### Background

A more unified approach to the design of cities and communities is needed in Canada to make them more “livable” for all

generations and cultures. One of the main components that have been missing to ensure livable communities has been universally designed single family housing. A promising approach is Visitability: an affordable and sustainable design strategy aimed at increasing the number of basic access family homes and neighbourhoods. Visitable housing is an exciting housing concept that is developing across North America and around the world. Visitable housing means the design of market rate housing to have a no-step entrance, wider doors and a bathroom on the main floor. With these three main features, a house can be much more functional, safer and useable for any family. It becomes easier to maintain, easier to move furniture in and out of, easier to get into and out of with a baby carriage, bicycle or cart; easier to have older friends and relatives visit and easier for anyone with difficulty moving around to live in. Such a home becomes more of a family home as friends and relatives can visit. This type of home design is increasing in importance as we see an increasing aging demographic with the baby boomer population. People are in the market for homes and neighbourhoods that are more livable; however at the present time; there is very little housing stock of this kind available in Canada. Many potential buyers and their realtors are frustrated with the lack of available housing choices. Homebuyers would rather purchase a home with the features they need rather than engage in costly renovations.

The North American “visitability” movement began in the late 1980s with the dual goals of ensuring access by people with mobility

impairments to their neighbors' homes and providing a basic "shell" of access to permit people to remain in their own homes if they develop a disability. Visitability doesn't offer total access, but does allow people with disabilities to enter the first floor or a home without being lifted up, and provides access to the rooms and bathrooms on the first floor. There are several visitability initiatives that have occurred in the USA as well as in Great Britain and Australia.

At the time this project was proposed, there was a lack of available basic access (visitabile) housing in Canada, a lack of knowledge of the diffusion of visitability in Canada, a lack of a central hub of information on visitable housing in Canada and a general lack of acceptance of visitability by developers, policy makers, jurisdictions, organizations, and individuals due to a lack of knowledge of what visitability is. This project made it possible to begin a national dialogue on visitability, to raise awareness and begin to build capacity to make changes in Canada

## **Methodology**

The goal of this project was to develop an understanding of visitability in Canada.

The objectives included: a) analysis of the progress and diffusion of visitability in Canada b) determination of the barriers, facilitators to its adoption in Canada and c) determination of best practices, gaps, trends and issues.

**Methods:** A multi-component research strategy consisted of an environmental scan and literature review, an on-line survey, a think tank, and facilitated discussions with a network of Canadian people facilitated by the project. One of the main methods used was a community-based participatory action research approach. An important part of this strategy was to include Eleanor Smith (Concrete

Change) as Senior Advisor on the project. The inclusion of Eleanor Smith was highly innovative and important. Eleanor had begun the visitability movement in North America and is a person with a disability herself. Her valuable insights and knowledge were integral to the success of this project. We also used this approach in the following way: our National Advisory Committee guided the project throughout; the National Advisory Committee began the process of network formation; we used the discussions from the survey, the Think Tank and the National Advisory Committee to assist in development of the Framework for Action and future directions; participants from across Canada used information obtained through the project to help them create change in their own communities/professions; results from the project will be provided back to the participants and to the community so that they can take action.

## **Activities**

To meet the project Goal and Objectives, the following **activities** were carried out:

- 1) A National Advisory Committee composed of a variety of stakeholders was established
- 2) An environmental scan was conducted to determine which provinces, municipalities; cities have started visitability initiatives leading to a database and network
- 3) The first Canadian visitability web site was established
- 4) The first Canadian (and North American) visitability Think Tank was held in Winnipeg where best practices, gaps, trends and issues were discussed
- 5) The First Canadian on-line survey to determine facilitators, barriers and further determine best practices, trends, and issues was conducted
- 7) Information and findings from the project were disseminated in publications and at conferences

- 8) A national network on visitability was established
- 9) Funding options to sustain the project were explored

**National Advisory Committee:** The Project Team established the National Advisory Committee early on and invited people from various sectors and regions in Canada. Our selection process involved seeking out members with connections to research and policy development, industry and community organizations in the areas of aging, disability, affordable housing and universal design. This early activity was not only important for the operation of the project; it also established the beginning of the first national network on visitability in Canada. This was later expanded with the Think Tank and later with the establishment of the list-serv. We wanted a variety of people who were “convinced” of the premise of visitability and its benefits as well as some who need “convincing”. We wanted people who would be aware of Visitability initiatives in their own provinces as well as people who would take action and make a difference. CCDS has a practice of including community and professional members as advisors and partners in all of its activities as highly valuable members.

#### Environmental Scan

Canada is definitely moving forward with Visitability initiatives as shown by the environmental scan, the on-line survey, the participation and interest in the Think Tank and the interest shown in the website. The environmental scan showed that in 2006-07 there were established initiatives occurring in Manitoba, Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, and the Yukon. However, Manitoba was a leader with a specific consultant on visitable housing and having the most reference to the term “visitable” in any guideline “recommendations”. Even

though Manitoba was ahead of many other provinces, it does not have “requirements” for visitability. All of the initiatives were regarding public housing initiatives and there were no private sector initiatives in place at this time. Canada is a leader nationally with established visitability technical statements in the CSA-B651-04 Standard which has contributed a great deal to the proliferation of visitable housing as many jurisdictions have adopted the specific visitability requirements found in the document. However, as has been stated, in the majority of cases, the reference to these technical requirements are related to public housing and are most often than not voluntary. The Department of National Defence/Canadian Forces Construction Engineering Technical Order (CETO) 2005 is a model in the world: DND/CF is the only jurisdiction where visitability is enforced in Canada.

#### Think Tank

The Think Tank was held in Winnipeg, Manitoba May 2007. It included a day and a half of presentations and discussions followed by a tour of three visitable homes. The Think Tank met its goal of raising awareness, facilitating learning about trends, issues, gaps, facilitating a network and also of serving as a catalyst for change.

Participants were highly energized after the Think Tank to make changes in their own communities and in their own fields. The event brought together nearly 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. Among the 57 in attendance, 38

people were from Manitoba, many of whom were representing national organizations. Four of the speakers were from the USA. There was a wide range of professionals in attendance from key sectors.

One of the key aspects of the Think Tank was its keynote presenters. The planning group carefully selected the keynote speakers not only to draw participants to the event but also to assist in engagement in lively discussion. For this purpose we selected three keynote speakers:

**Mayor Roger Claar of Bolingbrook, Illinois** presented the experience of Bolingbrook in instituting an ordinance that all new homes must be built to be visitable since 2003, a policy that has already produced more than 4,000 Visitable homes. He discussed why and how this was done, challenges and opportunities they faced, and how it is working after several years.

**Eleanor Smith of Atlanta and founder of Concrete Change** has been a leader in the visitability movement in the United States. She successfully advocated for the first ordinance in North America and has assisted many communities in advocating for visitability ordinances. She has successfully educated the public, professionals and government. She was also highly successful in working with the US Green Building Council on the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) to obtain LEED Points for visitable housing in neighbourhood design in February 2007.

All participants felt that this was just the beginning and further Think Tanks were needed both nationally and provincially. Participants also felt that there needed to be other sectors at the table including more from the seniors, more from aboriginal groups, more from planning and design.

## **Visitable Housing in Canada Survey**

The Visitable Housing in Canada Survey was an on-line survey occurring between March 31 and May 31, 2007. To distribute the survey we used several methods including: sending out invitations to targeted key stakeholder groups; inviting participation at a number of meetings that the project team and the Advisory Group attended; sending the invitation out to a variety of list-servs and asking key groups to advertise it on their websites. The survey was also available through a link on our website, emailed out to the mailing list. Four organizations specifically agreed to advertise the survey to their members and placed information on their website: the Canadian Association for the Fifty Plus 50+ (CARP), the Co-operative Housing Federation (CHF) the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists (CAOT) and the Manitoba Society of Occupational Therapists. In fact the CHF, hosted the information on their website without our asking and told us during the middle of the process.

The goal of the online survey was to understand the extent of Canadians knowledge and opinions on visitability and to determine facilitators and barriers to the adoption of Visitable housing. The survey was also a continuation of the environmental scan, collecting information on initiatives occurring in Canada, barriers and facilitators. The project team developed a list of questions which the Advisory Committee commented on until there was a cohesive set of 26 questions. When complete, the survey was sent to the CCDS Ethics Review panel for approval. We utilized an online survey tool called Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com),) that collected and stored the data from the 189 responses we received.

## **Visitable Housing Canada Website**

The Visitability Canada website ([www.visitablehousingcanada.com](http://www.visitablehousingcanada.com)) is a public and professional education tool whose purpose is to create a national dialogue, to collect and share information on initiatives for provincial and national initiatives, for providing information on resources/tools that are available, updates on latest news and events and for disseminating the research CCDS has collected from this project and others. This is the first Visitability website in Canada.

## Analysis

This project has met its goal of developing an understanding of visitability in Canada. It has made a major contribution to the visitability field as well as to Canadian society as we not only have a snapshot of what visitability looked like in Canada in 2006-2007, we also know what many people across Canada were thinking about and directions they were going in or planning on going in. The project also helped build capacity across the country. The following sections discuss gaps, trends, best practices found as well as barriers and facilitators to visitability in Canada.

Gaps/Issues:

Major gaps/issues identified were:

- There is a lack of housing stock that even has basic access in Canada
- In most cases people are forced to carry friends and relatives up stairs into their homes or have them not visit.
- There is a consumer demand: Realtors from the Think Tank indicate that they have many clients requesting at least basic access and they cannot find houses that meet their clients' needs

- Very few visitability regulations in Canada and most are voluntary and for publicly funded housing. No private housing ordinances were identified
- The aging population is growing and Canada needs to move forward immediately to meet housing needs of the future
- The housing industry/planners/designers are not educated on visitable housing
- There is a need to address existing housing stock with more and better renovation funding programs for accessibility: need a multi-pronged approach
- There is a lack of common terminology regarding visitability around the world

Trends

- Europe, the USA, Australia, Great Britain are moving forward in the area of visitable-like housing
- Canada is lagging behind other nations in terms of legislation, incentives, education on visitable housing
- There is a growing age demographic in Canada and around the world
- There appears to be a growing interest in visitable housing in Canada
- People from across Canada are anxious to move forward, to have an on-going network, and dialogue and to have tools and resources on visitable housing

Best Practices

One of the main visitability best practice examples that were highlighted by this project was the work that was being done by Bolingbrook, Illinois. The presentation by that city's Mayor, Roger Claar showed that

the visitability ordinance had been mandated since 2003 for all new housing and that builders/developers were building thousands of homes now with no complaints.

The CSA-B651-04 Standard and the DND/CF CETO were best practices in Canada nationally. Manitoba and the Yukon are showing best practices in Canada via the Government of Manitoba and the City of Winnipeg actions and in the Yukon by mortgage incentives.

Other important best practices were to:

- Link visitability with sustainability practices: LEED initiative in the USA and development of communities in Canada is very promising
- Link visitable with livable and age friendly communities initiatives
- Link visitability with the growing aging demographic
- Show that visitability is a universal design approach: a good design practice for all people

The on-line survey, the Think Tank and the networking were the activities that assisted us in determining barriers and facilitators to the adoption of visitability in Canada.

**The main barriers** that were identified included the following:

- **Costs, affordability and buy-in** – both real and perceived.
- **Attitudinal barriers** – both by industry, professionals and individuals
- **Lack of Education and marketing**
- **Lack of awareness and support by the Government**

To increase the amount of visitable housing in Canada, **the main facilitators** identified

by the project activities include a multi-pronged approach.

- Change mindset/attitudes
- Link with current planning objectives (smart growth, livability, inclusion).
- Government incentive programs
- Increase public demand
- Education and training of public, Professionals/ National advocacy groups
- Development of tools and resources
- Target and persuade key groups
- Outcomes research on visitable homes
- Maintain momentum
- Building code/legislation and regulation
- Identify funding and resources
- Develop a networking mechanism
- Central coordination point for activities
- Address existing housing stock as well as new housing stock by providing better resources/ incentives for home renovation for accessibility
- CCDS was identified as a leader in the effort to move visitability forward in Canada

The above ideas for facilitators formed the basis for a Framework for Action to move visitable forward in Canada. Participants in the Think Tank agreed to move the agenda forward in small ways in their own sectors. CCDS has already begun to act on some of the ideas and will present the framework for discussion at a follow-up Think Tank on the subject in March 2008. CCDS has obtained funding from ODI on a project regarding ageing with a long-term disability where housing is one of the important components to be examined.

**Outcomes:** This project has produced the first baseline of visitability in Canada with a snapshot of 2006-07. It also developed a tool: the first website that assists in Network development; it started a national dialogue & a Network; & built capacity as many people are moving the agenda forward in their regions as a result of the project.

### **Unexpected Outcomes**

Many unexpected opportunities resulted from the project:

#### Unanticipated Networking/Dissemination

- CCDS took part in a Visitability Teleforum in October 2006 which was organized by Canadian Housing and Renewal Association (CHRA)
- CCDS was invited to speak at the Human Factors in Design Conference organized by Therapy First March 1-2, 2007 in Winnipeg, MB
- CCDS presented the project the Festival of International Conferences on Caregiving, Disability, Aging and Technology (FICCDAT) in Toronto June 17-19, 2007.

#### Knowledge Transfer By Unexpected Organizations

- Many organizations assisted us in advertising the launch of the survey and website and Think Tank to their members by adding our project to their news and events section on their websites. The following organizations shared our information with their members: Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada, Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, and Canadian Association of the 50+.

- The Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists developed a webpage dedicated to Visitable housing as a result of the project

#### Capacity Building of Change Agents in Canada

- As a result of the project, Advisory Committee Members from Alberta, Nova Scotia and Ontario are bringing forward in those provinces
- Several people who attended the Think Tank or visited the website are moving the visitability agenda forward in their areas
- The City of Winnipeg moved forward with a recommendation to council as a result of our Think Tank and our facilitating discussion with councilors with the Mayor of Bolingbrook
- An advisory committee member spoke about Visitable housing at the Affordable Housing Conference in
- Architects without Borders-Winnipeg partnered with Habitat for Humanity- Winnipeg and have designed and built a visitable home with plans for more in the future.
- One Think Tank attendee is now working with a Manitoba home developer to build a visitable home development in rural Manitoba

### **Recommendations**

There is a need for further research on visitable housing in Canada including an on-going data collection of visitable housing initiatives; numbers of homes built; demographics and health outcomes of those living in visitable housing, injury statistics and cost-benefit analysis studies. There is also a need for development of Canadian specific marketing and educational materials and tools and courses as well as websites on this subject. As the study participants recommended

there is the need for a central hub to pull together all the information on what is happening in Canada and to facilitate a network where people can learn from each other. There is also a great need to establish mandatory policies on visitable housing in order to move the agenda forward.

## Next Steps

### **CCDS has made a commitment to continue work in this area.**

CCDS has already obtained funding from ODI for a project on aging with a long-term disability where housing is addressed. CCDS is already beginning to plan, organize a follow up national/international visitability Think Tank event – in 2008. CCDS will continue to seek funding to continue this initiative in Canada.

## Conclusion

It appears that this is a Phase of initiation of visitability activities in Canada. A few policies have been established but very few homes have been built. All policies so far are related to publicly funded housing. There are several key individuals across the country who are working as advocates to move visitability forward. This 2006-07 view indicates that Canada is behind in terms of progress in the USA, Great Britain and in Australia, however there is a great energy and movement forward.

We feel that this project was highly successful and we met and actually exceeded our project goals, objectives, outputs and deliverables. A significant amount of enthusiasm has been generated by this project across Canada. Although Visitability appears to be an emerging trend, no formal studies had previously been done in North America with residents, policy makers, and designers, builders to determine the issues, best practices, and

recommendations to promote an acceptance of Visitability. At the same time there was no central location to for key individuals to network on this topic in Canada. This project has moved the field forward in these areas. **This project should be considered to be a pilot and only the beginning of research on this subject.** We have discovered that there are many people across Canada in various sectors that are highly supportive of visitable housing initiatives. Many people have been become advocates in their own communities and at the same time many professionals have become advocates in their own fields. There appear to be some visitability-type of initiatives happening in Canada; however there is a long way to go in comparison to other countries such as the USA and Australia. In our efforts to develop new visitable homes we must also develop better home renovation supports to assist addressing the existing housing stock. The on-line survey was very important as there has been relatively little research done in this area and the results reveal the perceived and real barriers and facilitators to visitable housing initiatives in Canada.

The results of this pilot research will equip the CMHC, the federal government, provincial governments, urban planners and policy makers with some of the needed knowledge to make future policy recommendations.

All people that we have come in contact with this project have expressed an interest that CCDS continue to serve as the hub and coordinator of the Canadian Visitability Initiative including the website, the network building, further research, development of educational materials and courses, gathering of information on initiatives across Canada.

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