



IDeA Center
VIDEO LECTURE TRANSCRIPT

VISITABILITY

SPEAKER: JONATHAN WHITE

Welcome to the video lecture on, “Visitability.” I’m Jonathan White of the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University at Buffalo’s School of Architecture and Planning.

NEW SLIDE

In this presentation, I’m going to describe visitability. What is visitability? What does that mean? It’s not exactly what it sounds like. I’ll talk about voluntary and mandatory visitability policies and some of the cost research into visitability. I’ll also discuss some design strategies and best practices.

NEW SLIDE

Now, those of you who have read the housing chapter in our textbook, *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*, have a feeling for what visitability is. Now, in short, visitability is kind of what it sounds like. When it comes to housing, a house that is visitable is able to be visited by all people, including people with disabilities. But, as the visitability movement has grown, this has changed a bit and I’m going to go over that here today.

NEW SLIDE

So, what is visitability? Visitability is an affordable, sustainable, and inclusive design approach that integrates a few core accessibility features as a routine construction practice into newly built single-family housing.

While universal design and visitability originated at approximately the same time, the two movements did not converge during their early years. Whereas universal design emerged from the design and rehabilitation professional communities, visitability started and continues to be driven by grassroots organizers. Visitability is actually an example of universal design from a policy perspective because it applies to housing that is not necessarily occupied by people with disabilities. It provides a foundation for improving the home with additional universal design features, thereby lowering the cost of achieving higher levels of usability. However, unlike universal design, visitability focuses only on housing, includes measurable design criteria, and it seeks a rapid change of home construction practices.

The visitability movement started in the U.S. by Eleanor Smith and her group Concrete Change in 1986. Eleanor recently retired but her organization is still active.

Concrete Change began seeking ways to make all new homes not covered by current access regulations “accessible enough” for a visitor with a disability. More specifically, visitability was conceived as a way to provide basic access to single-family homes.

NEW SLIDE

And so what does this mean? If we conceive visitability as a level of basic access, it means a home can at least be accessed, though maybe not be fully usable by all, but a home can be accessed. Now we call this a universal design approach. That's not to say that visitable homes are necessarily universally designed, but that the approach, the idea of making every home visitable is a universal design. It makes the neighborhood, the community more inclusive as a whole. And so it's a big step in the right direction. It fills the gap in accessibility laws. Again as you may have learned from the textbook or our other lectures, the fair housing act very rarely applies to single-family homes, or homes with fewer than 4 units. So, this is where visitability would step in. Visitability, like I said is basic access. And to achieve basic access, there are really seven key features. A step-less entry at the front, side, or rear of the home, just one. Low thresholds, wider doorways, wider hallway clearances, at least one accessible half bath on the first floor, though a full bath is preferred, reinforcement in walls next to toilets for future installation of grab bars, and electrical switches and wall outlets at a reachable height. And Visitability is spreading rapidly around the U.S. and Canada.

NEW SLIDE

You know and as you can see, visitability programs skyrocketed for at least a decade. The latest information available is as of 2008 when we did a comprehensive study of the visitability related programs out there. It would certainly be quite an undertaking to update this data to today.

NEW SLIDE

As of 2008, the Total Number of Initiatives was 57. 33 of those were Mandatory Ordinances, and the Number of Voluntary Programs was 24. Even with limited data available, local government officials report a total of approximately 30,000 visitable homes built to date as a result of mandatory ordinances. According to the most recent data available, Pima County, AZ, whose ordinance applies to all new homes, has the greatest number of visitable homes with over 15,000 built. The second and third largest supply of visitable homes can be found in San Antonio, TX, with over 7,000 visitable homes and Bolingbrook, IL, with more than 3,500 visitable homes. Again, this was 2008 which is the most recent data available, so we're hoping it has increased since then.

NEW SLIDE

So let's take a look at some of the mandatory policies, Pima County, Arizona, Bolingbrook, Illinois are just to name a few. Federal legislation, HR 1408, the inclusive home design act has been introduced a number of times but has not made it through yet. New York State senate passed a visitability bill in 2010 but it has not yet been passed by assembly and I believe was in committee. I believe that means it may need to be re-introduced at some point given the change of legislators.

Then there is the ICC ANSI A117.1 Type C unit requirement. Now, ANSI is really a model code, but it is referenced by most building codes in the U.S. The standard can be referenced by local laws making it easier for municipalities to adopt it if they so choose, promoting uniformity in their application and interpretation.

NEW SLIDE

And then there are incentive and certification visitability programs. These are voluntary policies. So, for example, in 1999, there was the Illinois Accessible Housing Demonstration Grant Program Act. This gave \$5,000 to builders who constructed at least 10% of homes in a development that included visitability features. Irvine California had a universal design features list of options. Montgomery county Maryland had the Design for Life Montgomery visitability and livability program. It's a voluntary certification program. This program has two levels, visitability, plus livability, which adds a full bath and bedroom to the first floor and kitchen with a circulation path connecting all rooms to the entrance.

LEED-ND was developed by the US Green building council. It is the first national standard for certifying high-performance green buildings for neighborhood design (ND) and includes a credit for universal accessibility.

NEW SLIDE

Let's take a look at some of the potential barriers to visitability implementation. Now, from the homebuilder's perspective, they typically will support a voluntary perspective. They're looking at responding to the market demands and view this as a private matter, not something to be publicly controlled. They think that it increases construction costs, affecting affordability. Our studies show that it can increase cost slightly, but not enough to affect affordability. I'll go over that more later. Builder's also say that site constraints prevent a blanket regulation for zero-step entries.

From the advocate's perspective, consumer's lack awareness of what their accessibility needs will be as they age, thus the market isn't demanding it because they don't know they need it. Advocates suggest that builders don't just respond to the market. They help shape it. If they build enough of it, people will begin to demand it. They don't think homes are a private matter. Look at safety codes, smoke detectors, and such. There are codes for railings, proper stair dimensions, minimum room size. It is a matter of public concern. Advocates argue that there is no impact on marketability and aesthetics, as we demonstrate in our book *Inclusive Housing: A Pattern Book*, the subject of the online course, *UD and Housing 2: Design Applications*. They also say it has limited cost impact, which I'll go over in just a minute. And to address site constraints, all known existing laws and proposed laws have exemptions for technical infeasibility, so unusual sites would not need to comply.

NEW SLIDE

But, getting back to cost, here are some cost studies that were done. In new construction, a zero-step entrance maybe costs 150 dollars more, but to do it after the fact can cost \$1000 or more. Wider interior doors cost maybe an extra 50 dollars on average. To do this after the fact costs 700 dollars. So compare 200 dollars extra up front to 1700 later on.

NEW SLIDE

Now there was very comprehensive research done in 1979, looking at comparing housing with redesigned units designed to meet ANSI 1980 requirements. This is before Type C was developed so these requirements were more strict than the Type C requirements. Many more features. The cost of making them comply was less than 1% in new construction in all types of buildings. And that was for more than basic access. So, here we have even fewer requirements.

NEW SLIDE

The most recent research in 1993 confirmed the 1% finding. Steven Winter Associates in the Cost of Accessible Housing studied 8 developments around the U.S. They had 25 different housing unit types and they re-designed them using ANSI 1986 and Fair Housing Guidelines (later to become Type B). So, again here, many more features than visitability would require. The cost data was provided by the developers themselves. Again, less than 1%. Some of the units cost only .07% more, others would cost .87% more, an average of .63%, but all still under 1%. The major difference was in the site cost.

NEW SLIDE

So, the IDeA Center looked at doors to see the cost increase in widening interior doors. They contacted several suppliers and simulated ordering 120 doors, 30 each in 4 different sizes. Three are shown here. A 34 inch door would be required to meet visitability, because visitability requires 32 inch clear opening which means a 34 inch door. They were single pre-hung six-panel doors, no casing, hollow core with dull brass hinges. In each of five suppliers, we saw that the cost of a door in Boston was only 2.50 more to go from 32 to 34 inches and that price was the same for 36 inch. Chicago. Only 1.52 to go up to 34, and additional 3.38 to go to 36. Similar incremental changes across the other major suppliers. So, this is why I said, for wider doors on the first floor, it's not much extra, 50 dollars maybe, depending on how big the first floor is. Maybe you only have 4 interior doors on the first floor. Then, you can see it would be only 10 bucks extra to do this.

NEW SLIDE

I want to briefly go over some design strategies for visitability, but this course is really about policy. So, I'll just talk briefly on this.

NEW SLIDE

I mentioned it earlier, the book *Inclusive Housing: A Pattern Book* goes over more of the design applications. It can be a resource tool for designers. It encourages equitable housing practices for everyone and it takes the form of the pattern book, a familiar tool for planners, architects, and urban designers. It is available now from W.W. Norton but you can also find it on Amazon. And so this book will really get into the design applications and it compares visitability to lifespan design so you can see the differences, and hopefully decide to do more where you can in your designs. And again, UD and Housing 2 uses this book as its primary reading so if you want some further instruction and supplemental materials to the book, be sure to take that course.

NEW SLIDE

Okay. So. Just briefly, the entry. A zero-step entry is usually achievable with grading. This doesn't usually result in extra cost unless a retaining wall is needed. Ramps should be placed to work with the topography to reduce the ramp length. There are also some alternative construction methods that can lower the first floor level to be closer to grade. One is called the reverse brick ledge where the foundation wall is notched to allow the first floor framing to sit on it, allowing the grade to come closer to the door without coming into contact with the wood framing.

NEW SLIDE

And so here are some examples of grading to get at least one accessible entrance. The diagram on the top shows how a side entry can be accessible via a driveway, while keeping a traditional porch on the front. On the bottom of the screen is an example of how combining different slopes across a lot can be combined to form a block cross section, while providing access to at least one floor of every home. Then, on the left are some images of this sort of strategy. In the middle is a sloped walkway that mitigates the unusual slope on the site. On the bottom left is a ramp hidden in the landscape.

NEW SLIDE

And so before I conclude, I want to go over some best practices in visitability.

NEW SLIDE

The Mueller Community in Austin, Texas was designed to be walkable, convenient, and diverse. The image on the right shows how an alley could be used to help reduce the change in grade. It wasn't done in this particular case but it could have been easily.

NEW SLIDE

Now here's an actual visitable development in Memphis called Hope 6. All the homes are affordable and you can see the on grade entrances. They are fairly traditional in appearance.

NEW SLIDE

Here are some Habitat for Humanity ones in Atlanta. The one on the left has a wrap-around porch with a short ramp on one side. On the right is a home that has a short ramp on the driveway side leading to a back deck.

NEW SLIDE

And a few other examples from an infill housing district in Atlanta. The one the left, you have again a short ramp to the back deck. On the right, they used the grade to their advantage to have a short ramp to provide access to the visitable home.

NEW SLIDE

So, I hope this presentation gave you a good overview of visitability policy. Thank you for watching. More information can be found in our textbook, *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments* and in *Inclusive Housing: A Pattern Book*. You could also visit our websites listed on your screen now. For the University at Buffalo's Idea Center, I'm Jonathan White. Thank you again for watching.

Websites: Visit idea.ap.buffalo.edu, or visit www.udeworld.com

Contact Information:

Telephone Number: 1 7 1 6 8 2 9 5 9 0 2

Fax Number: 1 7 1 6 8 2 9 3 8 6 1

E mail: [AP hyphen idea at Buffalo dot E D U](mailto:AP-hyphen-idea@Buffalo.edu)

Address: Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access, School of Architecture and Planning, State University of New York at Buffalo, 114 D I E F E N D O R F Hall, 3435 Main Street, Buffalo, New York, 14214 hyphen 3087, United States of America

END