

VISITABILITY: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS IN BRIEF

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Abstract

Individuals born with physical disabilities may face a heightened risk of social isolation, both within public and private spheres. This risk may be further exacerbated in the home environment. The literal meaning of the word "visitability" according to the Cambridge English dictionary is something worth visiting or something capable of being visited, enhancing accessibility for everyone (Singh, 2024), irrespective of whether a person with any disability resides in the home. It emphasizes the importance of creating spaces that are inclusive and accessible to all potential visitors by incorporating features that ensure comfort and ease of accessibility (Latika Roy Memorial Foundation, 2024). The concept of visitability, first introduced by Eleanor Smith in 1987 (Smith, 2013), emerged through her advocacy with Concrete Change, an organization dedicated to promoting accessible housing designs. Originally, the criteria for a visitable home included a zero-step entry, a first-floor bathroom, and wheelchair-accessible doorways measuring at least 32 inches wide. Over time, framework of visitability got expanded by incorporating additional features, such as accessible outdoor pathways, first-floor bedrooms, and accessible light switches (National Council on Independent Living., 2024). These design strategies not only accommodate individuals with limited mobility but also enhance the overall functionality of spaces, improving safety and accessibility for tasks such as moving furniture, strollers and large objects.

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Introduction

THE FIRST FRAME WORK OF VISITABILITY

The Visitability movement in the United States originated through grass roots advocacy led by Eleanor Smith in an organization Concrete Change. Smith introduced and developed the concept in 1986, referring to it as "Basic Home Access". In 1990, when US advocates adopted term "visitability" following its use in the United Kingdom (UK). They adopted the term to emphasize that the goal is not the traditional "more homes for the disabled" but rather a change in standard homebuilding practices. The Atlanta chapter of Habitat for Humanity became the first organization to commit to going beyond accessibility in homes with disabled family members. By including these basic access features in every home built, their commitment contributes to an inclusive neighborhood for people with disabilities. Concrete Change continues to grow in number of participants and number of open-market houses built with the basic features. In 2017 Eleanor Smith retired Concrete Change. The National Council on Independent Living has agreed to transition and maintain all her data from the Concrete Change website to a new website, www.visitability.org.

The UK has applied the most widespread legal framework for the concept to date. In 1999, Parliament passed "section M", an amendment to residential building regulations requiring basic access in all newly constructed homes[1]. Advocates maintain that the philosophical underpinning of visitability is as critical as the specific features. They assert that building homes with steps at all entrances and narrow interior doors is a violation of human rights, given the harsh effects the barriers have on so many people's lives: physically unsafe living conditions, social isolation and forced institutionalization.

DEFINITION OF VISITABILITY

Newly constructed homes often contain the same architectural barriers as older ones such as steps at every entrance and narrow interior doors, with the bathroom door usually the narrowest one in the house. Supporters seek to change construction practices to ensure that all new homes, whether or not designated for people with mobility impairments, offer three specific accessibility features that will make it possible for most people to visit (Vujicic, 2012):

- At least one zero-step entrance on an accessible route leading from a driveway or public sidewalk.
- All interior doors being wide enough to allow a wheelchair to pass through (approximately 81 cm or 32 in).
- At least a toilet (room) on the main floor.

These features are designed around the needs of wheelchair users, but they also benefit people with other mobility impairments. Temporary disabilities could create a need; for example, a resident could break a leg and require a wheelchair, walker or other mobility device for an extended period. Living permanently with significant mobility

impairment requires two additional basic features on the main floor; a full bathroom and a bedroom or a space that could be converted to a bedroom. Visitability shares goals with universal design, but is more focused in scope, more specific in parameters, and more explicitly grounded in a social reform intent. Neither of these are a part of the visitability standards. Visitability features make homes easier for people who develop a mobility impairment to visit friends and extended family. The absence of visitability features often lead to social exclusion.. These features also provide a basic level of access that enables newly disabled people to remain in their homes, without undergoing expensive renovations, relocating to a different house, residing in an inaccessible home that endangers their health and safety (Meena, 2021), or moving into a nursing home.

GAINS WITH VISITABILITY

A focus on visitability of single-family homes instead of public buildings accessibility, such as government offices and restaurants, is typically mandated by national laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in the United States. Outside of the UK, single-family homes are the one of the few kinds of buildings which are still routinely constructed without regard to accessibility. The movement advocates for accessibility features in every home instead of just focusing on "special" homes. This approach prioritizes social inclusion, enabling them to participate in social activities. People who use wheelchairs or walkers, or are impaired by stiffness, weakness or balance problems are blocked by steps at every entrance of a home. Wheelchair users are stopped by inches from fitting through the bathroom door in a friend or relative's home. Narrowing the emphasis to the most essential features, which are:

- a) Entry into a home.
- b) Fitting through the interior doors.
- c) Usable toilet facilities.

While there are many possible or desirable features, strongly prioritizing the few features which are most crucial to visiting or residing in a home greatly increases the likelihood of widespread construction change. Basic access goes beyond visiting. It also helps a person of any age who develops a temporary or permanent mobility impairment. Without basic access in place, architecture forces severe choices, expensive renovations, assuming that the necessary changes are possible, being unable to enter or exit the home independently, or to use the bathroom at all. Moving to another home or to a nursing home or other specialized facility. These issues can apply equally to a person who is recovering from surgery, or to a person who has used a wheelchair for decades.

ISSUES WITH VISITABILITY

A zero-step entrance in new homes is something feasible, whether the terrain is flat or hilly. The entrance can be constructed at the front, side or back, depending on the topography. A driveway or sidewalk can be a tool for access to the best entrance. Porches and decks can be used to incorporate access, often in a manner that is not as obvious as traditional ramps. Incorporating accessibility planning stage is very much crucial. On new construction, a zero-step entrance can usually be incorporated without an obvious "ramp" per se. This can be achieved by constructing without a structure that has 90-degree drop offs at the edges and rails at the sides eliminating the need for grading and landscaping. Deliberately grading to permit the sidewalk to meet the porch without a step creates access with an invisible modification. For the 40% of homes built with a slab-on-grade foundation, the zero-step entrance is typically extremely easy. The methods for homes are virtually identical to those used for slab-built commercial buildings such as banks and restaurants. Homes with basements or crawlspaces can accommodate cost effective solutions which include using a porch as a bridge to the sidewalk; lowering the first-floor rim joist into a notch in the foundation wall at the time of construction; a short, conventional ramp tied into a side or back deck or porch; creative use of a small retaining wall; and constructing the zero-step entrance from the garage. Siting the home properly on the lot is the first step. Then grading and landscaping with access in mind makes creating a zero-step entrance quite easy.

BENEFITS OF VISITABILITY

Residents in the community can welcome guests who use wheelchairs, crutches, canes or walkers (walking frames), or who have some other mobility impairment such as stiffness, weakness or poor balance. When visitability is in place, mobility-limited people are not socially isolated by architecture. A family member can develop a disability through illness, accident or aging. The person and their family are more likely to be able to remain in their existing home. The alternatives can be drastic:

- Major, expensive renovation.
- Sell your home to purchase another house, which still may need modifications for accessibility.
- Build a new home or move out that family member to a nursing home.
- All residents find it easier to bring in baby strollers, grocery carts, or heavy furniture.
- Visitable homes enhance sale and resale in an era where both the number and the percent of older people are growing rapidly. Non-disabled buyers are attracted to well-designed homes that welcome their aging relatives and friends and provide easy-use convenience for themselves.
- Temporary disabilities, i.e., broken leg, surgery, etc., can require the use of a wheelchair or other mobility device during the recovery/rehabilitation period. This can be a major problem in most existing homes lacking these basic accessibility features, in some cases forcing a person out of their home during the recovery period.

- Visitability features cost little up front - unlike the much higher after-the-fact cost of widening doors, adding ramps or electric porch lifts and other remodeling (IIT Madras Meleci music, 2020).

Besides human rights, advocates cite the economic implications of visitability. Research by the National Association of Home Builders indicates that by 2010, half of all US homes will be headed by persons 55 years old or older. Average nursing home costs exceed \$60,000 per year per resident, while nearly 70% of nursing home costs are paid with public funds. Staying out of institutions as long as possible is a strong desire of most people and also financially beneficial to individuals, families, and society.

CURRENT VISITABILITY LAWS AND ITS ADAPTATIONS

Tracking the adoption of visitability across the world is difficult as a combination of legal mandates, incentive programs (United Nations, 2018), and voluntary programs exist. The term "visitability" is not used universally. Other factors complicating the research include the lack of an organization assigned to monitor visitability ordinances, and ordinances and laws that often do not specify the agency responsible for implementation. The AARP Public Policy Institute has produced a report – *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*. Page 32 has a summary of US efforts. In the United States, successful visitability legislation has been passed in many localities, including Atlanta, Georgia; Pima County, Arizona; Bolingbrook, Illinois; San Antonio, Texas; and the State of California. As of June 2006, 46 state and local municipalities had a confirmed visitability program in place; while 25 of these programs are mandatory ordinances, the other 21 are voluntary initiatives (i.e. cash and tax incentives for builders and consumers, consumer awareness campaigns, and certification programs). Additionally, the efforts to establish visitability programs are in progress in other states, counties and cities across the country. Research has identified another 30 initiatives in various stages of development. They range from organized groups of individuals with an expressed interest in beginning a visitability program to locations that are in the final stages of developing a program, in short we can conclude that concept of visitability even in developed countries are in its initial stages for policy legislations and further enhancements. In India the term visitability is often misinterpreted as accessibility, indicating a need for further developments and studies to develop this concept for to better serve the needs of the disabled population.

CONCLUSION

In the 21st century the concept of visitability holds substantial relevance as it directly impacts the daily lives of individuals with disabilities, enhancing their independence, social participation, and overall quality of life. Although distinction between developed and developing countries are often made based on factors like technological advancements and infrastructure, the concept of visitability remains crucial across all contexts. It is not just about advanced technology or modern infrastructure but about principles of inclusive and universal design that cater to everyone's needs, regardless of physical ability.

The concept of visitability gained momentum in the United States and the United Kingdom in the late 1980s, driven by the efforts of advocates like Eleanor Smith, who pioneered the Concrete Change movement in the U.S. Smith emphasized that accessible housing should not be a privilege but a standard feature of all new homes. Her advocacy focused on integrating basic accessibility features into homes to ensure that people with disabilities are not excluded from social and familial gatherings due to inaccessible homes. As we move forward in the 21st century, analyzing the importance of visitability from both policy and practical perspectives is crucial. It ensures that housing development aligns with the principles of inclusivity and accessibility, promoting a society where all individuals, regardless of ability, can live and participate fully. In India, the terms visitability and accessibility are often used interchangeably, but it's important to recognize that they represent distinct concepts. Accessibility is a broader term that encompasses various environments—public spaces, transportation, workplaces, and digital spaces—to be accessible to people with disabilities. Visitability, on the other hand, is a specific concept focused primarily on private homes being accessible to people with mobility impairments, especially ensuring they can visit without encountering barriers. Despite existing legal frameworks like the Rights of Persons With Disabilities (RPWD) Act, 2016, which mandates that all newly constructed buildings must be accessible to persons with locomotor disabilities, a disconnect between policy and practice persists. Many buildings still fail to meet even the basic standards of accessibility, highlighting a need for stricter enforcement and more awareness. This gap also presents an opportunity for employment and development in the field of disability-related architecture, a relatively new and underexplored field globally. In India, there is considerable potential for architects, urban planners, and policymakers to specialize in designing inclusive spaces that cater to the needs of persons with disabilities. If developed properly, this field can provide a holistic approach to accessibility, beyond mere compliance, by incorporating universal design principles that benefit all users.

In conclusion, the concept of visitability needs to be examined in greater depth in both developed and developing countries. For individuals with disabilities, a visitable environment can mean the difference between a life of active inclusion and participation versus one of isolation. By focusing on visitability, societies can foster a more inclusive environment where all individuals, regardless of ability, have the freedom to fully engage in social, economic, and cultural life.

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