



Visitability as an Approach to Inclusive Housing Design and Community Development:

A Look at its Emergence, Growth, and Challenges

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Abstract

As the population ages and faces a greater number of physical disabilities, housing and community design must be re-examined. This research explores the growing need for accessible housing in the United States and the recent emergence of visitability as an affordable and sustainable design strategy aimed at increasing the number of accessible single family homes and neighborhoods. Both a qualitative and quantitative methods approach was utilized to study the evolution of accessible housing policy in the United States, the history and fundamental principles of visitability, and the number and diversity of visitability initiatives and programs. The research explores existing theories on innovation diffusion to help understand trends in the visitability movement. The research also examines the challenges and controversies currently surrounding the visitability movement and potentially threatening its future success.

Visitability as an Approach to Inclusive Housing Design and Community Development: A Look at its Emergence, Growth, and Challenges

In the next 20 years, as millions of Americans reach their senior years, the nation will confront profound challenges in the domestic environment, including a lack of affordable and accessible housing. Although housing and neighborhood design affects everyone, the complex relationship between people and the built environment has a more significant impact on people with disabilities and the elderly population. Housing can either inhibit or facilitate the ability of these individuals to live and age successfully with independence and with dignity. As the population ages and has a greater number of people with physical disabilities, existing paradigms of housing and neighborhood design must be given greater scrutiny from a lifespan perspective. Unfortunately, the majority of today's housing stock fails to meet the most basic needs and preferences of these two population groups. Accessible residential arrangements that maximize individual autonomy and empower the elderly and the disabled are currently extremely rare, particularly in the single family housing market.

Responding to this need for more accessible homes, changes in public policy and new design practices have emerged. Visitability, a concept that describes affordable, sustainable and accessible design for single family housing, continues to gain popularity throughout the country. In an effort to thoroughly examine visitability, both qualitative and quantitative methods were utilized. The research examines five key topics: (1) the origins of this new inclusive design strategy, (2) its components and goals, (3) its ties to innovation diffusion research, (4) the rate of adoption by communities, and (5) obstacles to its adoption.

This report begins with a brief discussion of the need for more accessible housing in the United States and the evolution of federal accessible housing policy. The report then describes

the origin, components and goals of visitability, one of the newer developments in accessible housing policy. It then provides an analysis of the various implementation strategies employed by advocates and policymakers of visitability, as well as an examination of current state and local visitability programs and initiatives throughout the country. The report uses existing theories on innovation diffusion to help understand trends in the visitability movement. Finally, the report explores several emerging and controversial issues surrounding visitability and their implications for its further adoption and implementation.

The goal of this research, conducted between December 2003 and June 2004, is to obtain the most comprehensive understanding of visitability's history and document the most recent developments in its adoption. This research intended to update and build upon previous research by Spegal and Liebig (2003) and Kochera (2002), and in fact, used similar methods to track visitability programs and initiatives. Besides extensive Internet searches and postings on the visitability discussion list, sponsored by the IDEA Centerⁱ, many telephone interviews were conducted with federal, state and local housing agencies, finance departments and disability advocates' offices. Unlike earlier research, this study thoroughly analyzed both existing and proposed initiatives to track the diffusion of visitability and explore reasons for the observed patterns. Moreover, it attempted to provide explanations for the recent decline in the adoption rate of visitability.

Because not all locations use the term "visitability" in their efforts, it is difficult to track the adoption of visitability across the country. 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 (Spegal & Liebig, 2003). A loose definition of visitability was therefore used throughout this research in order to capture as much

information as possible on new accessible housing initiatives. Therefore, programs that neither specifically identified the three architectural features associated with visitability nor made visitability mandatory were still included in the results. For that reason, the term “visitability initiatives and programs” is used throughout this paper, rather than “visitability laws and ordinances.” A “visitability initiative” or “visitability program” refers to any organized effort that requires or promotes basic accessibility in single family housing. Visitability supporters do not strive to implement full accessibility or universal design. Instead, they simply believe that visitability features will make it easier for older people to modify their homes for aging in place. These supporters hold a shared belief that visitability allows people of all abilities to interact with each other. To understand the diffusion of the visitability concept including its popularity, the early history of its emergence and its implementation in ordinances were studied, tracked, and evaluated.

The Need for Accessible Housing

The vast majority of today’s single family homes, duplexes and town homes are constructed with formidable barriers to people with disabilities. Many homes are built with steps at all entrances and hallways and doorways that are too narrow for wheelchair use. Since most people in this country live in such housing, this lack of accessibility means that neighbors with disabilities are placed at a significant disadvantage in their social lives and in the housing market.

Health and Safety:

These housing problems are not limited to only a few. They negatively impact a large number of persons in the U.S. who have mobility impairments and therefore experience barriers within their own homes. This population includes people who use assistive devices such as wheelchairs, walkers, crutches or canes. It also includes persons with diseases or conditions such

as multiple sclerosis or severe arthritis that make negotiating steps extremely difficult or impossible every day or on a regular basis. While it is both difficult to determine the total number of persons with mobility impairments and the actual need for accessible housing, various research studies attempt to quantify the number of individuals who could potentially benefit from accessible housing. An analysis of data from the Disability Statistics Center reveals that approximately 6.8 million American residents use assistive devices to help them with mobility. While 1.7 million of these residents use wheelchairs or scooters, the remaining 6.1 million use other devices, such as canes, crutches or walkers (Kaye et al., 2000). Research also suggests that the use of mobility devices has grown in recent years, and is expected to continue to grow with the aging of the population (LaPlante et al., 1992).

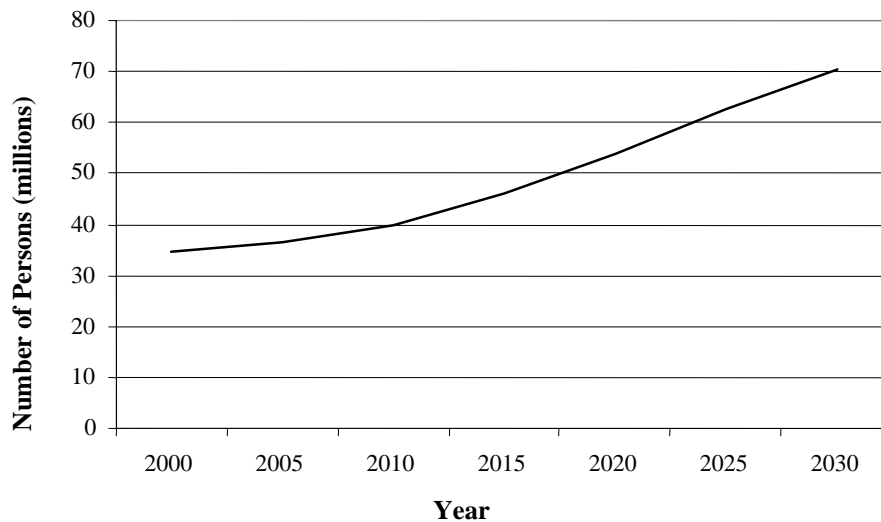
The need for accessible housing is further revealed in data from the 1990 National Health Interview Survey. That year, less than three percent of Americans lived in homes with any kind of accessibility feature.ⁱⁱ However, almost 30 percent of families contained at least one member with a disability (Kaye, 1998). A study published by the Department of Housing and Urban Development also emphasized the discrepancy between the need and supply of accessible homes. The research found that over one-million elderly homeowners have unmet housing needs. They have serious home rehabilitation and modification needs that, if unmet, could force them to move or seriously reduce their quality of life (HUD, 1999).

Aging Population:

Researchers and policymakers expect these housing problems to worsen in the next few decades as the country's population experiences a major demographic transformation; a growing share of the population is above the age of 65. Demographic trends, including the aging of the Baby Boomer generation, lower birth rates and longer life spans are combining to create this

changing demographic structure. Since 1900, the percentage of Americans 65 years and older has more than tripled (4.1 percent in 1900 to 12.4 percent in 2000), with the actual number of elderly citizens increasing 11 times (from 3.1 million to 35.0 million) over the same period (Administration on Aging, 2002). Projections based on U.S. Census Bureau data indicate that the number of persons age 65 and older will grow to almost 40 million by the year 2010 (Jones & Sanford, 1996) and 70 million by 2030 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Projected Change in U.S. Population Over Age 65: 2000-2030



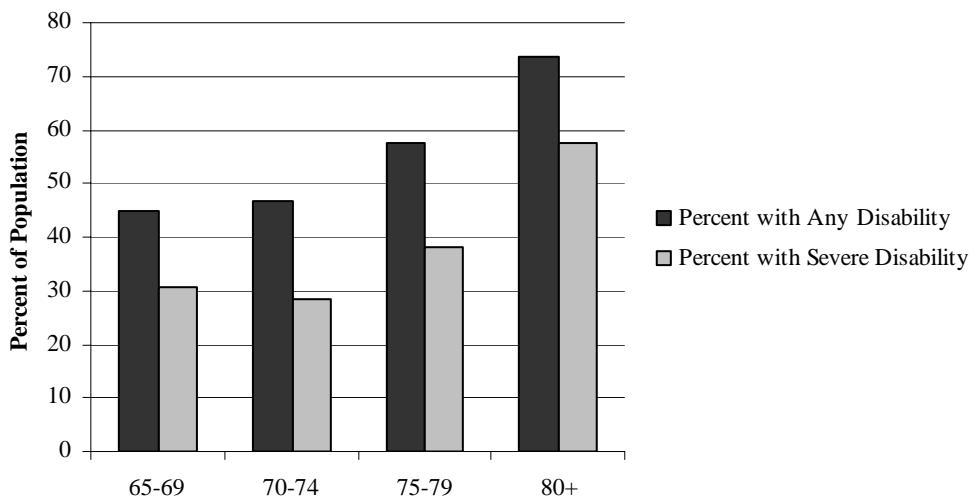
Source: U.S. Census, Population Projections, 2000

Rise in Disabilities:

In addition to living longer, people are now living longer with disabilities. The same advancements in medicine and technology that increased the human lifespan now enable people to survive accidents and illnesses that were once fatal. Although the overall share of elderly Americans with a chronic disability actually declined over the past 20 years, the number of older Americans with a disability continues to rise. This is because the growth rate for the older population is greater than the decline in the disability rate (Federal Interagency Forum on Age

Related Statistics, 2000). Therefore, although the likelihood of experiencing a disability increases with age (see Figure 2) and the number of elderly Americans with disabilities is currently increasing, the actual rate of disability onset amongst the older population is declining. Despite these trends, the need for more accessible housing will continue to grow in the next few decades.

Figure 2. Percent of Population with a Disability by Age



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2001

Housing Legislation:

Another factor contributing to the housing problem is the lack of federal legislation encouraging accessibility in housing. The Rehabilitation Act amendments of 1977 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) apply only to housing constructed with government funding and only require five percent of the units in covered projects to be accessible. Although the Fair Housing Act Amendments of 1988 requires all newly constructed multifamily housing, both public and private, with four or more units in elevator equipped buildings to be accessible, these regulations do not apply to single family homes and therefore exclude the largest section of the housing supply.

Despite existing legislative limitations, new strategies to incorporate accessibility in single family housing are emerging and gaining recognition. Because single family housing is often mass produced in the United States and tends to have a long lifespan once it is built, it is becoming increasingly important to improve housing designs and establish legislation to ensure that this part of the housing stock meets the needs of both today's population and future generations.

The Evolution of Accessible Housing Policy

The evolution of accessible housing policy over the past sixty years parallels the changing definition of the term "disability" and an increasing desire to address the needs of a greater segment of the population through new legislation. Beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, disabilities in the United States became more prevalent and visible as a result of America's involvement in several military operations and major advances in medicine. The mass production of penicillin in 1943 allowed many to survive injuries and diseases that were once fatal (Bellis, n.d.). In response to the increasing number of people with disabilities, the prevailing strategy for accommodating people with disabilities became treatment in institutions which resulted in social and physical isolation. Many people viewed disabilities as solely a biological and medical problem. Thus, in western culture, the view was that each person had to take responsibility for their disabilities and limitations. Some have argued that nursing homes, asylums and homeless shelters were created, in part, to keep people with disabilities out of sight (Welch & Palames, 1995). This cultural attitude negated the need for accessible residential environments in the general community.

Accessibility:

The movement for accessible environments actually began in the 1950s in response to both the needs and demands of disabled veterans and advocates for people with disabilities. These efforts continued to gain strength with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. The legislation and policies that resulted from these movements and numerous other efforts over the past forty years led to widespread awareness and rights for people with disabilities and the desire for more accessible environments. The primary objective of accessible design is to provide the same opportunities for people with disabilities as are available to every citizen. Accessible design helps shift the “blame” for limitations in function from the person to the environment and allows the creation of responsive environments “...in which disabled people can display competence and, by extension, overcome much of the dependency and stigma that stems from being environmentally incompetent” (Steinfeld et al., 1997, pp. 15). It ultimately allows people with disabilities to demonstrate that they can play a vital role in the community

Although there were voluntary efforts to encourage accessible design of buildings as early as the 1950s, these efforts ultimately had little impact. Between 1975 and 1980 however, there was a dramatic increase in both the number of regulations and in the degree to which they were enforced. The change was primarily due to the enactment of the Rehabilitation Act. Passed in 1973 and amended in 1977, this law became the most important item of Federal legislation on accessible design. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act specifies that programs supported by Federal funds providing services to the public (including schools and hospitals) cannot exclude people from participation because of a disability (Steinfeld & Levine, 2001a). The Federal government’s numerous efforts to assure accessibility in public buildings and programs slowly began to influence adoption of these principles in housing design.

Adaptability:

The adaptable approach to design emerged as a result of a changing definition of disability and a growing desire to increase the widespread implementation of accessible design in housing. People with disabilities no longer referred only to people in wheelchairs. There was acknowledgement that peoples' needs vary and that strict compliance to accessibility standards could not satisfy the needs of the entire population. Adaptable housing is basically wheelchair accessible in terms of circulation clearances but designed so that dwelling units can be easily converted to accommodate the specific needs of an occupant who has a disability (Steinfeld & Levine, 2001b). Adaptable features include reinforcement in walls to accommodate later installation of grab bars and a level of adjustability integrated into kitchen cabinets.

The Advent of Universal Design:

Recent legislation, advocacy movements and shifting philosophies not only try to appeal to a greater segment of the population, but also strive to fill the current gap in housing accessibility by specifically targeting single family housing. The notion that people with disabilities, and indeed all people, have diverse needs led to the concept of "universal design." Many people view universal design as a new buzzword for accessible design. However, universal design actually originated through a critique of accessible design and has a different philosophy than either accessibility or adaptability (Steinfeld, 1995). Universal design is an inclusive design approach that seeks to create products, systems and environments that can be used by all people, without the need for adaptation (Connell et al., 1997). Practicing universal design means abandoning the notion of the "average" user entirely and adopting an inclusive and pluralistic model in which design for differences is a key strategy. Therefore, products and environments that are universally designed must enable people who do not have disabilities as well as those who do.

Although proponents of universal design recognize that products and environments can never be fully usable by every person, full usability serves as an ideal or goal. Visitability is actually an application of universal design that specifically applies to housing and neighborhoods.

Accessible Housing and Aging in Place:

Universal design and visitability represent just two recent strategies among many that attempt to create more accessible housing. Parade of Home shows, model homes, and plan books that incorporate accessible designs all help raise awareness among consumers about the benefits of designing for accessibility in housing. Home modifications are another method for increasing accessibility in housing, and, in particular, a way to address the desire of most people to age in place. Rather than moving to a new home or to an assisted living facility, home modifications allow individuals to remain living independently or with assistance in their own homes as they age. According to a 2003 study conducted by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc. on behalf of the AARP, respondents overwhelmingly reported a preference to remain in their homes as they age. The researchers found that more than four in five (83 percent) persons age 45 and older strongly or somewhat agree that they would like to remain in their current residence for as long as possible (Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc., 2003). These findings are not limited to healthy adults. In fact, results from the federally sponsored National Long-Term Care Surveys show that persons 50 years and older with disabilities, particularly those age 50-64, strongly prefer independent living in their own homes to other alternatives (Gibson, 2003).

A recently established legal precedent promotes seniors' right to remain in their respective homes as they age. On June 22, 1999, the United States Supreme Court stated in Olmstead v. L.C. that "unnecessary segregation of individuals with disabilities in institutions constitutes discrimination based on disability because it perpetuates unwarranted assumptions that people

with disabilities are incapable of participating in community life” (United Spinal Association, 2003). In this landmark disability rights case, the State of Georgia’s continued institutionalization of two disabled individuals, who physicians had determined were able to return to the community, came under question. Basing its decision on individuals’ rights granted under the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act, the Court ruled that unjustified isolation was indeed a form of discrimination (O’Hara & Day, 2001). The law declares needless and avoidable institutionalization illegal and implies that it is also morally wrong.

Home modifications and supportive home environments assist older adults in achieving their goal to remain in their own homes. These homes contain features and/or home modifications that provide four key benefits. First, they make it easier for seniors to carry out daily tasks, such as entering and exiting the home, bathing and cleaning. Second, because they acknowledge seniors’ declining abilities, supportive homes often have sufficient space and features to facilitate care giving, either informally by relatives or formally by service providers and healthcare workers. Third, supportive features like handrails, non-slip flooring, and thermostats and outlets at more convenient heights help reduce the number of accidents occurring in seniors’ homes. These features help make a dwelling unit both safer and more empowering. Fourth, supportive home environments ultimately help reduce health care costs and delay institutionalization (Pynoos, 2001).

A Closer Look at Visitability

Unlike home modifications, where supportive features are incorporated to address residents’ individual needs, visitability strives to provide a baseline level of accessibility in all new home construction, in hopes of benefiting the entire population. Therefore, visitability is an affordable, sustainable and accessible design approach that targets single family homes, the only type of

housing not covered by the Fair Housing Act or any other federal or state legislation. Originating in Europe, the visitability movement was initiated in the United States in 1986 by Eleanor Smith, a disability rights advocate, and her group Concrete Change. Smith initially used the term *basic home access*, but in 1990 adopted the word *visitability*. Her ultimate goal is to make all new homes not covered by current access regulations “accessible enough” for a visitor with a disability. Thus, a visitable home is not necessarily intended to have a level of accessibility needed by a person with a disability. It is intended to be a residence for *anyone* and to provide access to *everyone*.

Three Principles of Visitability:

There are three fundamental principles of visitability. First, visitability is based on the idea that inclusion of basic architectural access features in all new homes is a civil right and improves every person’s ability to live productively and comfortably. People with disabilities should be able to visit their neighbors for mutual assistance, friendship formation and childcare. In most neighborhoods, however, a major barrier to social participation for individuals with disabilities is the lack of opportunity to visit other homes. When only a few houses have full access, people with mobility impairments are confined to their homes for socialization in the neighborhood and segregated from others; when people develop impairments, they must find new places to live or wait for expensive renovations; and, when accessible entrances, in particular, are built as renovations, the results are often awkward solutions that reinforce the stereotypes and stigmas often associated with disabilities and accessibility. In response to these circumstances, visitability strives to create an opportunity for all neighbors in a community to socialize, help each other, and interact more effectively. It attempts to break down attitudinal as well as physical barriers to social integration of people with disabilities.

Second, visitability rests on the notion that, through good design, basic accessibility to single family housing can be provided in most cases with minimal financial cost. The design philosophy contends that access is cost-effective if planned in advance. Incorporating accessible architecture features into housing designs during the early stages of development and before construction remains affordable. Although only a limited number of studies actually have analyzed the specific costs associated with visitability, these studies agree that introducing visitability through retrofitting results in significantly higher costs. Table 1 compares the costs between including visitability features in new construction and during a retrofit.

Table 1. Visitability Cost Comparison for Select Features

	New Construction	Retrofitting
Zero-Step Entrance	\$150	\$1,000
Widen Interior Doors	\$50	\$700
Total Cost	\$200 (or 1/3 cost of a bay window)	\$1,700

Source: Concrete Change, n.d.

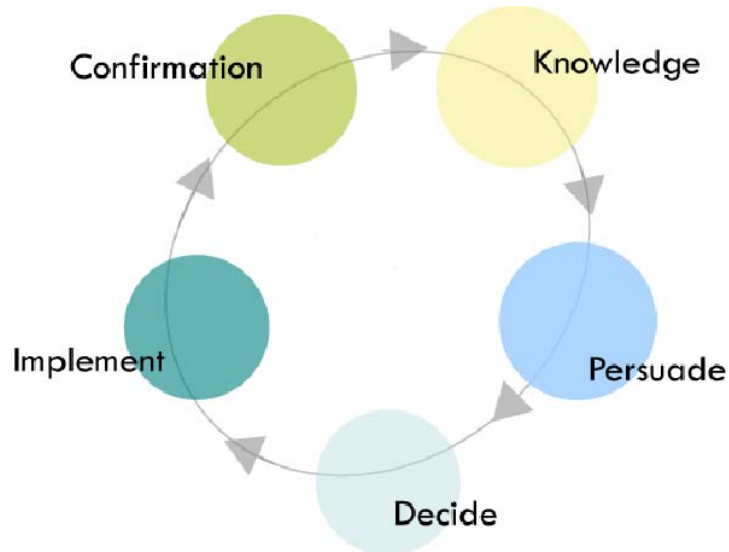
The third principle of visitability suggests that simplicity promotes implementation. Prioritizing access features ensures that the supply of accessible homes will increase more rapidly. Visitability advocates argue that a long list of demands can create the misconception that all access features are equally urgent, and therefore must all be included in a home. Many builders and designers may currently perceive this as too difficult to even attempt. However, visitability advocates argue that not everything is of equal urgency. Some access features are more important than others in helping individuals visit with their neighbors.

Visitability as an Innovation:

Visitability’s simplicity as a means to promote adoption is compatible with lessons learned from the study of innovation and its diffusion. Everett Rodgers (2002) defines innovation as "anything perceived to be new." He argues that it is not the reality that matters but the

perception. Although visitability may not require new technology or look radically different, if it is *perceived* as something new, individuals will respond to it as if it *were* new. Because visitability is a new concept to most people they consider it innovative. Therefore, those who wish to promote visitability need to understand the components of the innovation-decision process. According to Rodgers, “The innovation-decision process is the process through which an individual (or other decision-making unit) passes from first knowledge of an innovation, to the formation of an attitude toward the innovation, to a decision to adopt or reject, to implementation and use of the new idea, and to confirmation of this decision” (Rodgers, 2002, pp. 216). Rodgers proposes that the adoption of an innovation is a cyclical decision-making process with six activities: obtain knowledge, persuasion of the key decision-makers, decision to act on the new idea, implementation and confirmation (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Rodgers’ Innovation Adoption Process



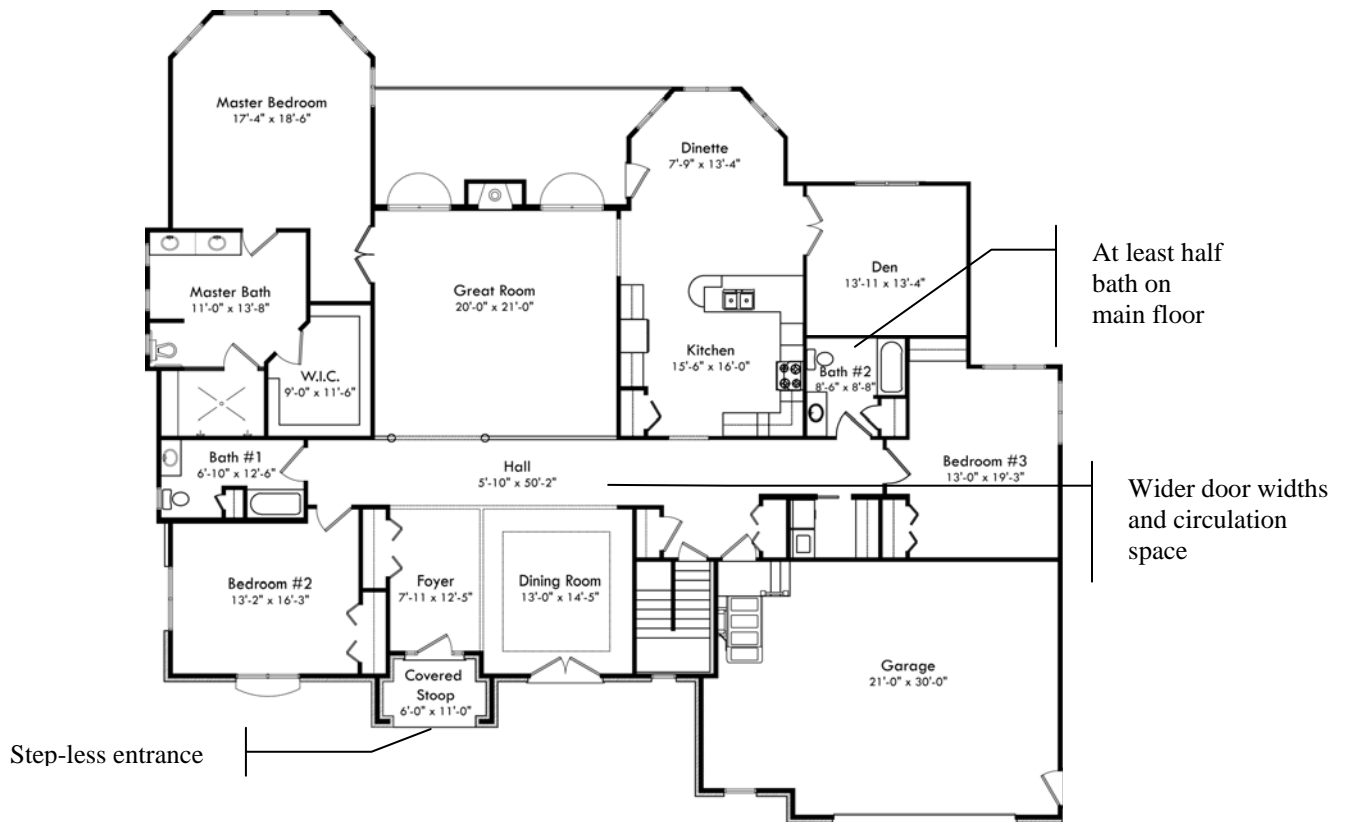
Source: IDEA Center, 2003

Moreover, Rodgers argues that the pace of innovation adoption varies greatly. According to him, there are five attributes of innovation that enhance its adoption or diffusion rate: *relative*

advantage, in which the diffusion rate is enhanced if there is a clear financial or social advantage for the new idea as compared to the idea or product it would supersede; *compatibility*, whereby if the innovation is congruent with current values, experiences or needs, its rate of adoption will be faster; *trialability*, an innovation will be adopted more rapidly if it can be experimented with at relatively low cost of time, money and commitment; *observability*, where the more an innovation is visible to others, the higher its rate of adoption will be; and finally, research by Rodgers' and others discovered that the pace of an innovation is affected by its *complexity*; the more an innovation is perceived to be relatively easy to understand and use, the higher the expected adoption rate (Rogers, 2002, pp. 223-259).

This last characteristic specifically applies to visitability. In keeping with Rodger's theory that simplicity promotes implementation, a visitable home is one which meets only three conditions: one zero-step entrance, doorways that are 32 inches wide and basic access to at least a half bath on the main floor (see Figure 4). These three features are considered the most essential for a person with mobility impairments to visit or live in a home, at least temporarily. In response to criticism that these three features are insufficient, Eleanor Smith argues, "What I'm after here is radically changing the way all new houses are built...and if you're going to do that, you can't have a long list of demands" (Truesdale & Steinfeld, 2002, pp. 3). Visitability advocates believe that once builders learn that visitability is easy to achieve and they receive positive confirmation through sales and consumer acceptance, they will be more likely to expand the list of universal design features they include in the next generation of housing.

Figure 4. Three Key Elements of Visitability



Source: IDEA Center, 2003

Visitability and Neighborhoods:

Along with individual single family homes, many advocates and researchers view visitability as a major step towards achieving universal design on a neighborhood level. In acknowledging the valuable role of visitability in developing active communities, Truesdale and Steinfeld contend that “Although less than the ideal of a universally designed home, visitability is actually universal design practiced through community and neighborhood planning. It ensures that a basic level of accessibility will be provided in all housing, and, it opens opportunities for participation in community life” (Truesdale & Steinfeld, 2002, pp. 8-9). Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the differences between a traditional and visitable neighborhood. Whereas the porches and front

stairs in Figure 5 present an obstacle to many individuals, the step-less entrances in the visitable neighborhood create an inviting and accessible environment for people of all abilities.

Visitability provides benefits to a wide range of users, including those with disabilities, their nuclear families, friends, and other relatives who may, from time to time, need to use wheelchairs or other adaptive equipment. Consequently, rather than forcing individuals to remain isolated and confined to their personal surroundings, visitability allows individuals with a variety of abilities to interact with each other and participate in community activities outside of their homes.



Figure 5. Traditional Neighborhood in Atlanta, GA
Source: IDEA Center, 2002



Figure 6. Visitable Neighborhood in Decatur, GA
Source: IDEA Center, 2002

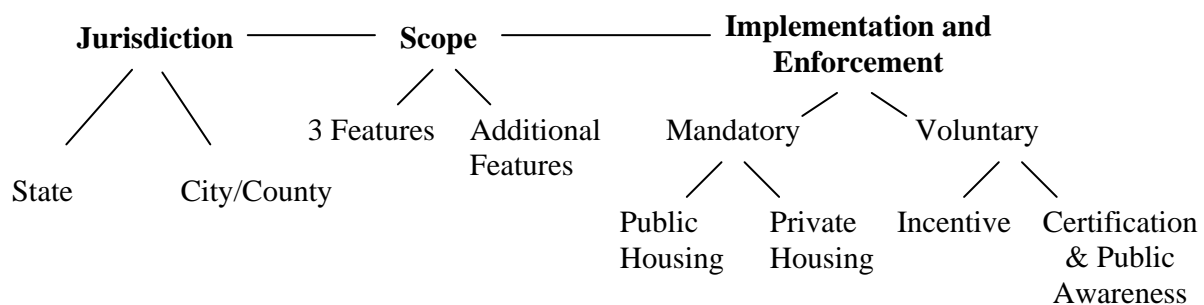
The Visitability Movement

Recognizing the benefits and growing need for more accessible housing, many state and local jurisdictions have joined the visitability movement. In fact, several municipalities and states across the country have already formalized and enacted visitability programs. Despite their common goal of increasing the supply of accessible housing, these visitability programs vary significantly. The three primary ways they tend to differ are the geographic regions they cover, the scope of features they include and the strategy by which they are implemented and enforced

(see Figure 7). For instance, some visitability programs cover housing within an entire state, while others only have jurisdiction over cities and/or counties. In addition, some programs strictly adhere to the three basic accessible features (step-less entrance, wider doorways and hallways and a half bathroom on the main floor), while others include additional architectural elements such as lever handles, blocking for grab bars in bathroom walls, and accessible environmental controls.

Visitability programs also vary in how they are enforced. Some visitability initiatives are mandatory (54 percent), whereby builders and homeowners are required by a law or ordinance to include the three visitable features during new construction, while other programs are voluntary (46 percent). With voluntary programs, builders and consumers are encouraged to include the visitability, but they are not obligated to do so. There are additional variations within mandatory and voluntary programs. Although the majority of mandatory initiatives only apply to homes built with public funds, a few of these programs apply to both public and private homes. Moreover, with respect to voluntary programs, some programs offer monetary incentives while others involve certification or public awareness campaigns.

Figure 7. Variation Across Visitability Programs



Whereas most visitability initiatives specifically apply to new housing, initiatives in all three types of jurisdictions (state, county, and city), including Georgia (2000), St. Louis County, MO (2003) and Pittsburgh, PA (2004) do not preclude coverage of substantial renovations and

retrofits in their respective guidelines. Incorporating renovations in visitability programs extends the housing market affected by the program to include existing homes. Although this expands the opportunity to increase the supply of accessible housing, it also could retard the advancement of the visitability movement. Encouraging consumers and builders to incorporate accessibility features after initial construction results in higher costs and ultimately reinforces the common misconception that visitability demands substantial spending.

Mandatory Visitability Initiatives and Programs:

In 1992, Atlanta, GA passed the first ordinance requiring basic visitability features in single family homes or duplexes built with any type of subsidy from the city. These subsidies include tax incentives, city loans or financial grants, land grants, or local dispositions of federal block grants (Kochera, 2002). The success of this influential ordinance led to the implementation of similar legislation in other locales across the United States, including Austin, TX (1998), Urbana, IL (2000), San Antonio, TX (2002) and most recently in St. Petersburg, FL (2004). Georgia (1998), Texas (1999) and Kansas (2002) were the first states to pass similar legislation.

Although most existing visitability legislation, at both the state and local level, only applies to new publicly funded housing, some jurisdictions use alternative strategies to promote visitability in new single family homes. For example, some municipalities and states have mandatory visitability legislation that applies to all new housing, including privately financed homes. Naperville, IL (2002), Pima County, AZ (2002) and Bolingbrook, IL (2003) and the state of Vermont (2000) have legislation that requires visitability in all new housing. The state of Florida passed a similar law in 1989, but the law only has requirements for accessible bathrooms. Arguably the first piece of visitability legislation, the “Florida Bathroom Law” requires all

bathrooms in new single family homes, duplexes, townhouses and condominiums to have a 29 inch door width, but it makes no mention of accessible entrances or hallways.

Voluntary Visitability Initiatives and Programs:

In lieu of mandatory visitability initiatives, some states and municipalities have chosen to support voluntary programs for builders, developers and consumers to promote the integration of visitability principles in new housing. These programs include cash and tax incentives for builders and consumers, consumer awareness campaigns, and certification programs, and they have emerged in locations from California to New York. The city of Irvine, CA established the Universal Design Program in 1999. The program requires builders to provide consumers with a list of 33 optional accessibility features. The builders are obligated to include any of these elements if the consumers request them. Consumer awareness campaigns also have been implemented in San Mateo County, CA (2001), Albuquerque, NM (2001) and Syracuse, NY (2003).

Representatives from the state of Illinois chose to utilize a different implementation approach, and today the state has one of the largest builder incentive programs for encouraging visitability in the country. Established in 1999, the Accessible Housing Demonstration Grant Program offers builders \$5,000 to incorporate four specified features into each “spec” home they build. These four features include the three traditionally associated with visitability (step-less entrance, wider doorways and hallways, and a half bathroom on the main floor) plus bathroom walls reinforced for grab bars. The intended goal is to encourage builders to provide these features in at least ten percent of the homes in a housing development and to generate builder expertise and public awareness that will lead to acceptance in the unsubsidized market. Despite its efforts, the Accessible Housing Demonstration Grant Program has thus far failed to attract

participation from homebuilders. As of May 2001, there had been no activity in the fund, even though \$1 million was appropriated for it by the legislature. This lack of utilization may be a good example of the negative perception builders have about accessibility. Perhaps they think it will cost more than \$5000 or they believe that accessible houses will have a stigma attached to them and not appeal to the average home buyer. Regardless, the program is expected to continue throughout 2004, or at least until the one million dollars devoted to it are exhausted.

Learning from these challenges, the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA) decided against offering similar direct cash incentives to builders incorporating visitability features. Instead, the PHFA joined forces with the Pennsylvania Housing Research Center (PHRC), Life and Independence for Today (LIFT), originators of *VisitAbility* in Pennsylvania, and Help Yourself Design, Inc. (HYD), a local accessibility design firm, to participate in a research and marketing project. The demonstration project goes beyond simply providing incentives to builders to incorporate visitable features. It also includes research that documents the costs and provides positive publicity to visitability. The ultimate goal is to produce research tools for builders to help them recognize that visitability is both feasible and inexpensive. The initiative is currently publicizing events at recently completed visitable homes to attract homebuyers, builders and policymakers to witness first-hand the advantages of visitability.

Rather than approving a mandatory or incentive based program, representatives in Visalia, CA initiated a certification program in 2001. The voluntary 'Visitable Home Program' rewards builders with a certificate if they incorporate visitable features in their designs. Although these builders do not receive direct monetary compensation, the positive publicity often leads to additional clients and new projects. The EasyLiving Home^(CM) program is another certification program designed to encourage builders of single family homes and townhomes to incorporate

several features that increase the sellers' market and offer buyers a home easy for all to live in and visit (Concrete Change, n.d.). Established in Georgia in 2002, the EasyLiving Home^(CM) program was developed by a group of public and private organizationsⁱⁱⁱ to encourage the voluntary inclusion of key accessible features in single family homes. Extending beyond the three elements of visitability, the EasyLiving Home^(CM) program also requires a bedroom on the main floor, as well as some entertainment space and a kitchen in its list of approvable features. Homes that incorporate these features receive a seal of approval from the Easy Living Home Coalition. As a recognized brand name, the EasyLiving Home^(CM) program attracts homebuyers who are interested in cost effective, accessible and convenient homes. Organizers are currently working to expand the program to other states.

Visitability and Innovation Diffusion:

The adoption of visitability reflects parallel findings in innovation adoption research. For example, Rodgers argues that the diffusion of an innovation often leads to changes to the innovation. He states that “Sometimes the adoption of an innovation does indeed represent identical behavior...In many other cases, however, an innovation is not invariant as it diffuses. The new idea changes and evolves during the diffusion process as it moves from adopter to adopter” (Rodgers, 2002, pp. 180). This process, known as “re-invention”, refers to the degree to which changes and modifications are made to an innovation before it is adopted and implemented (Rodgers, 2002). The great variation in existing and proposed visitability programs reflects this phenomenon. It is important to recognize that this is normal in the innovation diffusion process. Rodgers argues that deviations made during the implementation stage should not be discouraged. In fact, he claims flexible innovations, through re-invention, more easily meet the needs of a wider range of adopters, and therefore lead to a faster rate of adoption and

ultimately support the sustainability of an innovation (Rodgers, 2002). Thus, with respect to the diffusion of visitability, differences between initiatives could be embraced rather than stifled. Municipalities that amend existing programs to better meet their specific needs will be more successful in adopting visitability.

Innovation diffusion research also suggests that strong communication networks are critical for an innovation to be adopted. “Diffusion investigations show that most individuals do not evaluate an innovation on the basis of scientific studies of its consequences...Instead, most people depend mainly upon a subjective evaluation of an innovation that is conveyed to them from other individuals like themselves who have already adopted the innovation” (Rodgers, 2002, pp. 18-19). Therefore, locations with visitability programs often used strong communication channels, such as advocacy with influential leaders, mass media, and interpersonal relationships, to inform constituents about visitability and to persuade them to approve its adoption.^{iv}

Existing Visitability Initiatives and Programs:

As of June 2004, 41 state and local municipalities had a visitability program in place. Table 2 presents a distribution of both the mandatory and voluntary visitability initiatives currently active in the United States.

Table 2. Existing Visitability Initiatives and Programs

Mandatory		Voluntary		
Mandates Tied to Public Funds	Mandates For All New Homes, Including Privately Financed	Builder Incentives	Consumer Incentives	Consumer Awareness Programs/Certificate Programs
Atlanta, GA (1992)	Naperville, IL (2002)	Southampton, NY (2002)	Freehold Borough, NJ (1997)	Irvine, CA (1999)
Austin, TX (1998)	Pima County, AZ (2002)	Houston, TX (2004)	Southampton, NY (2002)	San Mateo County (2001)

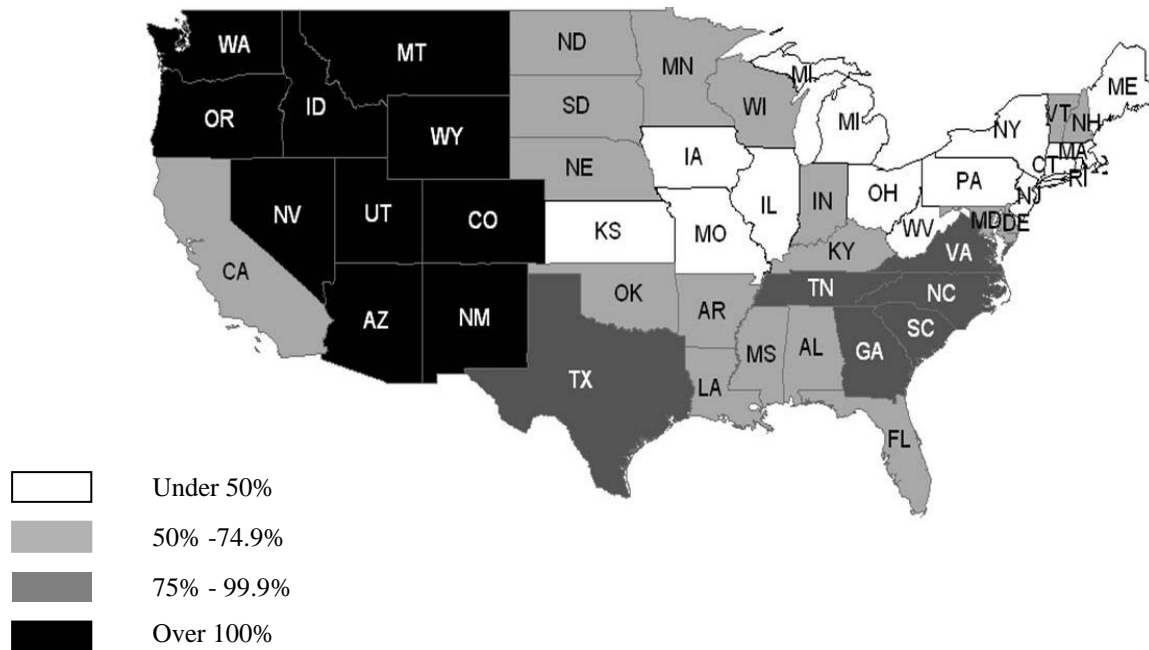
Urbana, IL (2000)	Bolingbrook, IL (2003)		Escanaba, MI (2003)	Visalia, CA (2001)
Fort Worth, TX (2000)			Pittsburgh, PA (2004)	Albuquerque, NM (2001-2002)
Long Beach, CA (2002)				Howard County, MD (2001)
San Antonio, TX (2002)				Onondaga County (2002)
Iowa City, IA (2002)				Syracuse, NY (2003)
Chicago, IL (2003)				Sacramento, CA (2003)
St. Louis County (2003)				
St. Petersburg, FL (2004)				
Texas (1999)	Florida (1989)	Illinois (2002)	Georgia (1999)	New Mexico (2001)
Georgia (2000)	Vermont (2000)	Pennsylvania (2004)	Virginia (1999)	Easy Living Home Project in Georgia (2002)
Minnesota (2001)				
Kansas (2002)				
Kentucky (2003)				
Oregon (2003)				

Source: IDEA Center, 2004

According to Table 2, visitability programs are neither limited to a specific region of the country nor to a particular type of community. In fact, visitability programs are geographically dispersed across the country and extend to both urban and rural locales. While the majority of local programs are located in urban counties, which have higher populations and housing densities, visitability programs also exist in suburban and rural locales. For example, Delta County, MI has a significantly lower percentage of urban housing units (49.9 percent) than the national average (77.6 percent), yet the city of Escanaba still developed a voluntary visitability initiative in 2003. Moreover, initiatives are not limited to states expecting a large surge in their elderly population (see Figure 8). While the population of older persons is projected to grow at a higher rate in states located in the West, excluding California, there are visitability efforts in

states not anticipating quite as large gains in their senior population, such as Pennsylvania, Kansas and Illinois.

Figure 8. Increase in Population Over 65: 1995-2020



Source: IDEA Center, 2004

Proposed Visitability Initiatives and Programs:

Besides the 41 mandatory and voluntary programs already in place, there are numerous efforts to establish visitability programs in other states, counties and cities across the country. The research identified 12 state and 15 local initiatives currently underway. They range from organized groups of individuals with an expressed interest in beginning a visitability program, such as in Rochester, NY and Montana, to locations that are in the final stages of developing a program, as in Pittsburgh, PA and Missouri (see Table 3 for a complete list of locations with proposed visitability initiatives). While the final outcomes of these initiatives remain uncertain, their emergence symbolizes a growing interest in incorporating more accessibility elements in both public and private housing.

Table 3. A List of Locations with Proposed Initiatives (as of June 2004)

States	Cities and Counties	
New York	Southampton, NY	Warren, MI
New Hampshire	Sacramento, CA	Knoxville, TN
Pennsylvania	Syracuse, NY	Denver, CO
Iowa	Santa Monica, CA	
Wisconsin	Toledo, OH	
Michigan	Birmingham, AL	
Montana	Rochester, NY & Monroe County	
Colorado	Montgomery County, MD	
Indiana	Pittsburgh, PA	
New Mexico	Philadelphia, PA	
California	Baltimore, MD	
Hawaii	Dearborn, MI	

Challenges and Controversies

Despite its rise in popularity and widespread diffusion, visitability continues to face some challenges and controversies. Questions regarding the legality of local ordinances, the cost effectiveness of programs and the feasibility of implementation have loomed since the philosophy emerged. In response to the legislation that affects both publicly and privately financed housing, the Pima County, AZ and Naperville, IL local chapters of the National Association of Homebuilders (NAHB) immediately took aim at the law's constitutionality. A Tucson builder and the Southern Arizona Home Builders Association (SAHBA) claimed "that the relevant county ordinance violates the equal protection and privacy clauses of the state constitution, and challenged the ordinance in court" (Lawlor, 2004, pp. 37). Arguing that the ordinance deprived homeowners and builders of the fundamental right to design private homes, SAHBA eventually took their case to the Arizona Court of Appeals. In its verdict, the Court of Appeals unanimously ruled in favor of the county:

It is a given, the appeals court said, that homeowners do not have a right to be completely free from governmental regulation of their property. For example,

building codes that affect homeowners' exercise of personal, private, and aesthetic choices are a proper exercise of the police power. Accordingly, the court said, it agreed with the lower court that the ordinance did not unconstitutionally infringe on a homeowners' right to privacy. (Lawlor, 2004, pp. 37)

Whereas the victory in Pima County mandated the continued inclusion of visitability features in all new single family home construction, the Northern Illinois Home Builders Association forced concessions to the visitability ordinance in Naperville, IL. They succeeded in removing the no-step entrance provision in the legislation.

Cost and Aesthetics:

Besides infringing on homeowners' "rights", many critics of visitability also argue that inclusive design costs too much and negatively affects the aesthetic quality of homes. While cost studies are somewhat limited, researchers and professionals continue to affirm the minimal cost of visitability. Ed Phillips, Executive Director of the Home Builders Association of Georgia recently confirmed, "When Visitability features are planned in advance by a well-informed builder, [the] typical added cost is very low for a new, single family detached home...Less than \$100 for homes on concrete slabs, and \$300-600 for homes with crawl spaces or basements" (Smith, 2004, ¶1). Critics also argue that visitability features are obtrusive and unappealing which will deter many homebuilders and homeowners from including them in their plans. In many cases, however, visitable homes remain indistinguishable from conventional designs. "Ideally, Visit-able features are integrated into the design and are not noticeable. In fact, many consumers view them as an attractive asset because of their increased usability" (Truesdale & Steinfeld, 2002, pp. 12). As Figures 9 and 10 illustrate, visitability does not have to neglect aesthetics. Visitability features, such as a step-less entrance and a ramp, can be successfully incorporated into a home's design without sacrificing visual appeal.



Figure 9. A Visitable Townhouse
Source: IDEA Center, 2002



Figure 10. A Visitable Single Family Home
Source: IDEA Center, 2003

Enforcement Strategy:

Visitability supporters are not immune to conflict. As critics question the credibility and fundamental purpose of visitability, advocates struggle with specific policy issues that surround the inclusive design strategy. For example, there is some disagreement within the visitability advocacy community regarding the best strategies to promote the construction of accessible single family housing. Whereas some supporters argue for mandatory visitability legislation, others believe voluntary efforts are more feasible and will still be effective. Research on the pros and cons of mandates and incentives in affecting consumer behavior reflects this split amongst visitability supporters. While there is evidence that mandates draw the least favorable response from citizens, other evidence reveals that most consumers will not respond favorably to voluntary efforts. Rodgers argues that incentives, with sufficient compensation, increase the relative advantage of an innovation for consumers and influence behavior change. Incentives encourage consumers to adopt a new idea and therefore often result in a faster rate of innovation diffusion (Rodgers, 2002). Despite the benefits of incentives, Rodgers also argues that mandates are needed in situations when certain types of behavior change are demanded by a government, but not by individual citizens (Rodgers, 2002). For instance, governments might recognize the

benefits of visitability and approve legislation even though some influential constituents express opposition and argue for homeowners' rights. Determining the appropriate type of program therefore requires careful consideration by policymakers and advocates. In striving for a visitability program, they must adopt an effective visitability program that yields results but does not alienate their constituents.

Degree of Accessibility:

In addition to enforcement strategies, advocates and visitability supporters also disagree over the limited amount of accessibility included in visitability. Some believe that the basic access features typically required in visitability ordinances do not go far enough, and by settling for them, advocates lose the opportunity for more desirable standards. Others however believe that visitability currently is the best way to get some housing built now with at least a basic level of accessibility and believe that any strategy that works should be supported. When asked about the difference between pursuing visitability as a design standard and pursuing a higher goal (i.e. a fully accessible or universally designed home), Eleanor Smith states:

What I'm passionate about is getting those basic changes made as quickly and broadly as possible, and in doing that, I'm looking at the reality of what (housing) is going up, not what (theoretically) should be...there are a lot of grass roots efforts out there who've done really well ... and we're looking to build a bridge between those grass roots (efforts) and the limited number of professionals we've found who are excited about the concept of Visit-ability and about the prospect of seeing it move very quickly from being an idea to being 'applied Visit-ability' or, in other words, bricks and mortar. (Truesdale & Steinfeld, 2002, pp. 4)

Conflict with Other Design Strategies:

Confusion and conflict also exist between visitability and other residential design philosophies. Many people often incorrectly use the terms visitability and "aging in place" interchangeably. Aging in place refers to design strategies that support the popular desire amongst seniors and people approaching retirement age to remain in their own homes as they get

older. In one study, more than four in five (83 percent) persons age 45 and older strongly or somewhat agree that they would like to remain in their current residence for as long as possible (Mathew Greenwald & Associates, Inc., 2003). While visitability and aging in place share some characteristics, their goals are fundamentally different. Whereas visitability strives to improve every person's ability to engage in social participation, aging in place targets older and middle aged people and addresses their preference to stay in their own homes. Aging in place also requires more accessibility features than visitability; therefore any corresponding legislation should reflect these differences. The incorporation of features intended to accommodate aging in place into some visitability legislation raises questions about the differences between the concepts. Incorporating aging in place as a goal of visitability also implies that more features than visitability promotes should be provided. This confusion and ambiguity ultimately creates problems for advocacy and policy development.

There are also potential conflicts between visitability and Traditional Neighborhood Development (TND). TND, sometimes referred to as "New Urbanism," is a movement in architecture and planning that advocates the use of traditional neighborhood design to create European-style, pedestrian-oriented communities rather than large, single-use developments connected by streets hostile to pedestrians (Torti Gallas and Partners, 2004). A design trend that began in the late 1970s and ultimately developed in response to urban sprawl and disconnected communities, TND advocates strive to create diverse, walkable and more "livable" neighborhoods. While TNDs possess many features that are beneficial to older people and people with disabilities, such as narrow streets, a dense mixture of residential and commercial uses, and an emphasis on pedestrian life and public transportation, the traditional housing designs are often inaccessible. TND advocates place great value on ensuring residents' privacy and typically raise

porches above grade level to accomplish this. Lacking a step-less entrance, many homes in TNDs are inaccessible and consequently in conflict with visitability. Fortunately, attempts to reconcile the two philosophies are underway. Representatives from the Congress for the New Urbanism, a chartered organization established in 1993, and the visitability movement met in June 2004 at CNU XXII to begin discussing the resolution of conflicts between the two design strategies.

Besides these broad policy issues visitability proponents from many cities and states with proposed initiatives cite specific reasons for delays in adoption. Representatives from initiatives in Baltimore, MD, New York, Pennsylvania and Iowa indicated that their stalled efforts are due to the lack of definitive data on the costs associated with visitability. They suggest that more empirical data would help argue the case for visitability legislation and/or programs. Proponents in Dearborn, MI and Denver, CO cite opposition from homebuilders as the main reason for their problems. Just as in Naperville, IL and Pima County, AZ, these homebuilders object to any restrictions placed on their designs. Some other proposed initiatives have not been implemented simply because of the slow movement of the political process. Whereas advocates in New Hampshire and Pennsylvania have seen their visitability bills stall or die in committees and are now contemplating their next move, those in Philadelphia and Missouri are simply awaiting final hearing dates and votes.

Legal Restrictions:

Perhaps the most severe obstacle for proposed mandatory initiatives exists in California, Michigan and New York. These states all have legal restrictions that may impede adoption of local visitability ordinances. Michigan has a law stating that no city, county, or village can pass a building code or ordinance that is more restrictive than the state building code. Since the

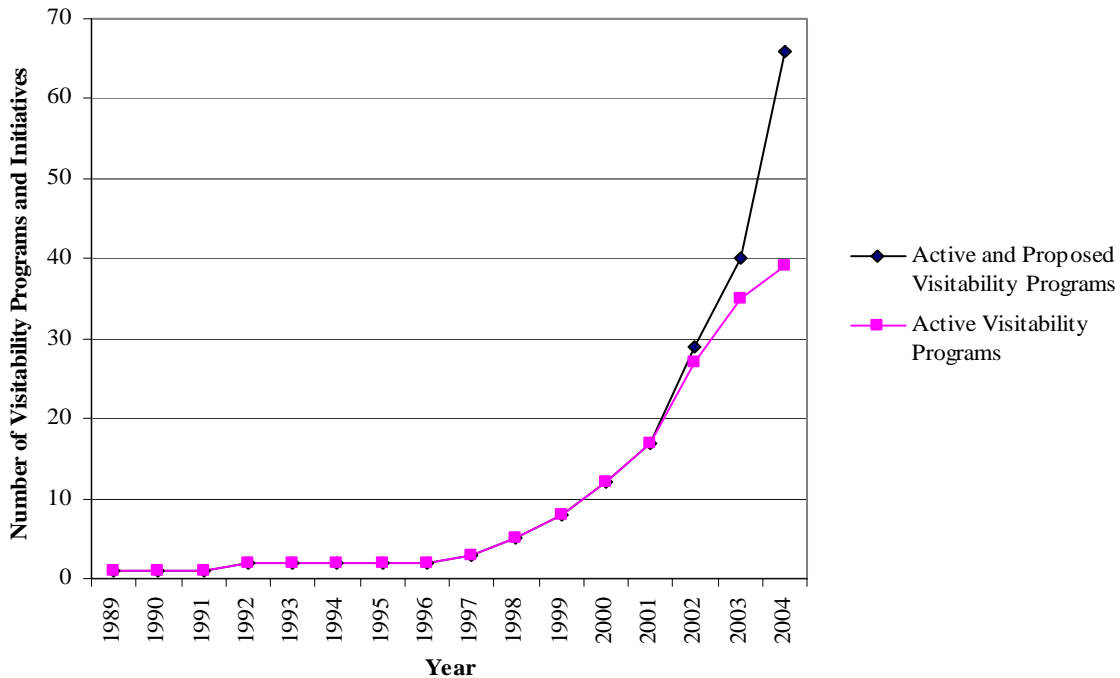
interpretation of attorneys for the state essentially eliminated any local visitability legislation or regulation, advocates must now pursue financial incentives instead. In addition, there is a position held by many in California that their state law preempts any attempts to regulate privately funded, single family construction. Although advocates have spent the past two years waiting for the state to pass legislation allowing local municipalities to control such construction, such a law has not yet been approved by the legislature. In the mean time, staff and a statewide advisory committee have drafted several model ordinances. Similarly, many visitability efforts in New York State have stalled due to laws that limit local legislation from exceeding the requirements of the State Building Construction Code. In Syracuse, NY, the local visitability ordinance application was rejected by the state. Local, city and county legislators have since issued a Resolution to encourage New York State to amend its Executive Law to incorporate visitability, but the law requires approval of changes by the State Codes Council. This council is dominated by construction professionals who do not support visitability initiatives. Consequently, many cities within New York State and California have turned to voluntary efforts to promote visitability's implementation.

Stagnation in Visitability Adoption Rate:

The aforementioned broad legal and policy issues, coupled with the more specific obstacles, appear to have had a dramatic effect on the recent adoption rate of visitability initiatives. Comparing the total number of initiatives over the past 15 years, both active and proposed, to the number actually active today reveals a plateau in the adoption rate (see Figure 11). Even though the past four years have yielded the greatest new visitability activity, they have not been overwhelmingly successful. While interest in visitability has grown significantly and the number of proposed initiatives has risen exponentially, the number of active initiatives appears to be

leveling off (see Figure 11). This indicates an overall decline in the rate in which locations are formally adopting visitability programs. It appears that the various broad and specific policy issues surrounding visitability may have to be reconciled in order to ensure future success in adoption of this inclusive design strategy.

Figure 11. Total Number of Visitability, 1989-2004



Source: IDEA Center, 2004

Lack of Production:

The stagnation in the adoption of new visitability programs is compounded by the lack of visitable homes being built in communities that have already adopted visitability. Primarily because many locations place numerous restrictions on the homes that must comply with ordinances and other mandatory programs, municipalities with established visitability programs are failing to build large quantities of visitable homes. For example, in Oregon (2000), accessibility requirements only apply to new rental housing units and consequently they exclude the single family home market. Moreover, visitability programs in Minnesota (2001) and

Kentucky (2003) only apply to homes financed with funds from the Minnesota Housing Finance Agency (MHFA) and the Kentucky Housing Corporation (KHC), respectively. This again limits the number of homes covered by established visitability programs.

Lack of Information:

Another factor contributing to the decline in adoption and production is the lack of information on the actual success rate of both mandatory and voluntary initiatives. Once again drawing on innovation diffusion research and theory, visitability supporters place greater emphasis on adoption rather than the consequences of adoption. Rodgers contends that “Most past diffusion research stopped with an analysis of the decision to adopt a new idea, ignoring how this choice is implemented and with what consequences” (Rodgers, 2002, pp. 440). Only a few locations with visitability programs actually track the number of homes built with visitability features, and those that do often do not have a formalized documentation procedure in place. Consequently, it remains unclear which implementation strategy (i.e. mandatory, incentives, or consumer awareness campaigns) is the most successful in getting visitable homes built. Even locations informally tracking the number of visitable homes fail to provide evidence confirming that large numbers of visitable homes are actually being built in communities with ordinances or voluntary programs. Representatives from Austin, TX (1998) reported only 278 homes built over four years, while representatives from Kansas (2002) reported 12 single family homes and 12 duplexes under construction as of January 2003. Some locations with visitability ordinances and programs attribute the low numbers of visitable homes to a slowed economy and a general reduction in all new home construction. In explaining inactivity in Freehold Borough, NJ, Kochera reports, “The applicability of the ordinance to accessibility features offered in new

homes has not been tested because Freehold Borough has very little new construction activity” (Kochera, 2002, pp. 17).

A Look to the Future

Regardless of these challenges, the visitability movement continues to push ahead. Perhaps the greatest indication of its popularity and continued support is a relatively new federal bill, H.R. 1441: The Inclusive Home Design Act. The bill was first introduced in the House of Representatives in 2002 by Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL). A revised bill was reintroduced on June 5, 2003 and now has 25 cosponsors and over 25 organizations supporting the legislation. In the press release announcing her sponsorship, Schakowsky stated, “Under current law, 95 percent of federally supported homes do not have to meet any accessibility standard. This creates unnecessary barriers for disabled veterans and other people with mobility impairments...A federal law will build on the momentum that has already been created here and abroad” (Schakowsky, 2003). As the bill passes through various congressional committees and undergoes numerous changes, advocates continue to garner additional sponsors and support. If eventually passed, the federal legislation would mandate that all federally financed housing include visitability features. Such revolutionary legislation would significantly contribute to closing the gap between the demand for and the supply of accessible housing available in today’s housing stock.

Until federal legislation passes, the future adoption rate of visitability can be influenced by additional research, as well as continued support from advocates, builders and legislators. More definitive and comprehensive studies on the costs and benefits of visitability and research on the number of visitable homes built using each implementation strategy would help strengthen visitability supporters’ efforts. Finally, studies that demonstrated how visitability provides more

accessible, safer, and more convenient homes would demonstrate the effectiveness and general value of the concept.

Visitability advocates could gain insight from innovation diffusion theory and research to ensure future success of the movement. Innovation diffusion research confirms that strong communication channels through established social networks, incentives and the opportunity for re-invention will increase the likelihood of implementation. Therefore, visitability supporters must continue to draw awareness to the visitability movement by attracting media outlets, influential leaders, and policymakers to the cause. Various types of incentives could be examined to increase the relative advantage of adopting visitability. And advocates must remain mindful that municipalities are not all alike and variation across visitability programs should not be discouraged.

As the recent demographic shift begins to compound the current lack of accessible housing and neighborhoods, a growing segment of the population will confront challenges in accessibility and usability of their dwellings. Visitability not only addresses the need for more accessible housing, but it also recognizes that this need extends beyond the multifamily housing market. Individuals who prefer to live in single family homes express a need and desire for accessible housing as well. Visitability ultimately provides innovative, cost effective and viable strategies for transforming and improving the nation's housing supply and meeting the needs of a changing population.

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End Notes

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ⁱⁱ Accessible features include ramps, roll-in showers and lowered cabinets.

ⁱⁱⁱ The group included members from AARP of Georgia, Atlanta Regional Commission, Concrete Change, Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, Home Builders Association of Georgia, Shepherd Center, and the Statewide Independent Living Council of Georgia.

^{iv} The Pittsburgh Task Force on Disabilities assembled influential leaders and media in February 2003 in an effort to implement a successful visitability program in Pittsburgh. The full day program brought together representatives from the American Institute of Architects, the Community Design Center of Pittsburgh, the city of Pittsburgh Department of City Planning, The Disability Agenda Housing Committee, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, Edward Steinfeld of the IDEA Center/RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo, and Eleanor Smith of Concrete Change. Spearheaded by Paul O'Hanlon, Executive Director of the Disability Law Center, the program educated a diverse group of stakeholders on visitability, exposed them to influential leaders in the visitability movement, and provided them the opportunity to have informal contact with their peers. The successful event led to continued dialogue between advocates, builders and policymakers, and eventually to an incentive-based visitability program, which was passed in November 2003.