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The visitability challenge

PHILIP LANGDON (/node/8502) SEP. 1, 2002

New urbanists wrestle with how to make houses more accessible without increasing the barriers to creating better neighborhoods. An idea called "visitability" looms on the new urbanist horizon. It could bring opportunities to accommodate disabled people in whatever dwellings are built in the future. But it could also pose an obstacle to the making of compact communities in which residents' front rooms are just a few feet from public sidewalks. Visitability was the focus of a session at CNU X in Miami Beach, and it is an issue now being tackled in a collaborative way by designers like Ray Gindroz of Urban Design Associates, academics like Edward Steinfeld at the SUNY-Buffalo School of Architecture, and advocates like Eleanor Smith of the Disability Rights Action Coalition for Housing (DRACH). At its simplest, visitability means that an individual in a wheelchair will be able to visit any house — because each house will have a no-step entrance on the front, side, or rear that can be reached without obstacles. Once inside, the visitor will have access to at least a half-bath on the first floor. Doorways of the bathroom and other first-floor rooms will be at least 32 inches wide, allowing a wheelchair to pass through. Smith, a founding member of DRACH and director of Concrete Change, an organization that is campaigning for visitability, cites three

reasons for the importance of eliminating all unnecessary barriers: • "We're living in a time when the elderly population is mushrooming, and the great majority want to continue living in their own homes, not move into senior housing." • The number of people who live for decades as paraplegics or with other physical handicaps is growing. "Younger people are living with injuries that in the past would have killed them." • Electric wheelchairs and scooters have made the disabled much more mobile. "People who formerly would have stayed home would now really like to go a Superbowl game or visit their neighbors." On the other hand, visitability worries some designers because if it becomes a rigid dictate, it could make certain kinds of housing almost impossible to build, with damaging consequences for New Urbanism. An experience I had in Boston illustrates the point. In 1995, Progressive Architecture sent me to examine Harbor Point, a 1,283-unit mixed-income development that had largely overcome the crime and social problems of its predecessor, Boston's notorious Columbia Point public housing project. As I walked the broad central mall of that rebuilt development, I realized that although the atmosphere seemed safe and orderly, the public spaces felt lifeless. Why was this? Because most occupants of ground-floor apartments, which were built at grade, had pulled their shades down and kept them down much of the time. "There's a privacy issue," the leasing director confirmed. Occupying the front rooms with the shades up was like living in a goldfish bowl. The apartment interiors were overly exposed to passersby on the sidewalks a few feet from the windows. When I asked the lead architect, Joan Goody of Goody & Clancy, why she hadn't elevated the apartments a few feet above the sidewalks to prevent such visual intrusion, she said wheelchair access requirements dictated that the apartments be built at grade. This despite the fact that on Boston's Commonwealth Avenue — the boulevard on which Harbor Point's 110-foot-wide mall was modeled — the first floors are several feet higher than the sidewalk, giving occupants a comfortable perch above the passing pedestrians. The conflict between barrier-free design and compact neighborhoods with lively sidewalks is shaping up as a delicate issue. After disability rights advocates staged a protest and demanded last year at CNU IX in New York that new urbanists do a better job of providing homes visitable by everyone, discussions ensued for several months between CNU members and DRACH members. On behalf of CNU, Gindroz and Andres Duany then wrote an article (an edited version of which appears on page 21 of this issue) containing these conclusions: • "Multifamily buildings with elevators and single-family houses with deep front yards often can be built with a zero-step entrance from the street." • "For building types too close to the sidewalk to achieve this from the front, a zero-step entrance can be provided in the back yard." • "A zero-step entry can be accomplished either with a ramp or by grading the site with side yards at a higher level than the street." Some HOPE VI projects sponsored by the US Department of Housing & Urban Development require visitability, although it's not a blanket mandate. "HUD wants you to do as much visitability as possible," says Murphy Antoine, project manager for Torti, Gallas & Partners/CHK architects. "They will hold you to what you proposed in your grant application." Visitability is beginning to receive attention from

local and state governments. Steinfeld, who directs the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center on Universal Design in Buffalo, says Atlanta led the way with a visitability ordinance in 1992. Since 1998, ordinances have been enacted in six other localities: Austin, Texas; Urbana, Illinois; Irvine, California; Visalia, California; Pima County, Arizona; and Naperville, Illinois. The state of Kansas enacted a visitability law last spring. At least six other cities are now working on ordinances. So far, says Steinfeld, the provisions have applied only to housing built with public funds or other public contributions, such as land. Some new urbanists worry, however, that over time, the requirements could become more extensive and more rigid. "CNU suggests caution in hastily endorsing new standards because these can harbor unintended consequences to urbanism," Gindroz and Duany state in their article. "We have learned from experience with lending institutions, water quality requirements, and traffic engineering that specialized and categorical standards all too often undermine the complexity intrinsic to urbanism." "The expansion of interpretation that frequently follows such legislation could eliminate building types such as the four-to-eight-unit walk-up apartment buildings, which are so useful for interspersing affordable housing into single-family residential areas," they warned. "If taken to extremes, urbanists could be left with only two legal residential building types — the single-level house and large elevator-accessed apartment buildings — further reducing Americans' options to any but the most crudely diagrammatic communities." Duany has voiced concern about requiring an accessible bathroom on the first floor of every unit, contending that large bathrooms could devour small live-work units. He has suggested that bathroom requirements be based on a size-of-unit threshold. He expects to include some visitability ideas in the "Smart Code" — a template for a New Urbanist planning and zoning code, which DPZ Architects is preparing for dissemination to local governments. Smith believes that although "CNU and New Urbanism are doing tremendous things to undo mistakes of the past," they have committed "one new mistake" by popularizing housing with raised porches and elevated entries. Gindroz replies that certain "essential qualities of urbanism" involve changes of level. The challenge, he says, is to "find the right design solutions and means to implement them." This is not as easy as someone unacquainted with building and development practices might think. An example: A house built on a crawl space uses wood floor joists, which according to most codes must be 18 inches above the ground. The floor structure itself measures 12 to 16 inches. "So," says Gindroz says, "you're up to about three feet above the ground." Any attempt to overcome such elevation changes will have to take into account construction practices and building codes. At College Park, a Memphis HOPE VI project designed by Torti Gallas, housing was built at grade. Though detached and semidetached dwellings at College Park have front yards that put some distance between house and passersby, some of the rowhouses and stacked units come as close as six feet to the sidewalk. This is less than ideal. It's sometimes possible to resolve the elevation question by sloping the land. But on naturally flat sites, this involves making "a lot of artificial grades to get the water away," Murphy says, "and

it’s tougher the denser you go. You end up pushing a lot of dirt around.” That can be costly. At the City West HOPE VI project in Cincinnati, Torti Gallas addressed the visitability issue by creating alleys from which a person in a wheelchair could enter the houses. Another factor is that when houses in historical styles, such as bungalows, are built at grade, they sometimes appear odd. They look as if they’ve sunk into the ground. To people who are accustomed to seeing certain kinds of houses sitting on raised foundations, the lack of a visible base can be esthetically jarring. And woe to the for-profit builder who offends his customers’ esthetic expectations. Rather than build houses at grade, Gindroz prefers to slope the walk to the porch, slope one side of the porch, or place the stepless entry at the rear. CNU and disability rights’ advocates have agreed that the best solution for the time being is to gather as many design ideas as they can. In collaboration with CNU, Steinfeld’s organization intends to produce one or more publications — probably including a book — that would present a wide range of design approaches and “best practices” that new urbanists and others could use. Steinfeld sees this kind of information as crucial because “a lot of new urban communities are places that attract empty-nesters, places where people expect to spend the rest of their lives. And people with disabilities want a community they can live in and be socially integrated. They want an ability to form friendships, not stay in their own houses.” Ideas will be accepted both at CNU offices in San Francisco and at the Rehabilitation Engineering Research Center, School of Architecture and Planning, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY 14214-3087 (phone 716-829-3485; web site www.ap.buffalo.edu/rercud (http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/rercud)). u

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Activists call 'New Urbanism' to account over lack of visitability

By Eleanor Smith

New Urbanists, whose ideas are influencing community design all over the country, tout walkable communities, decreasing energy waste from suburban commuters by revitalizing inner cities, and other socially advanced principles. Proponents repeatedly assert that such home-office-store communities, because of their density and proximity to shopping and public transportation, are excellent for older people who can no longer drive.

Homes in New Urbanism communities are by and large neither livable nor visitable by people with mobility impairments.

Atlanta-area visitability activist Stephanie Gillain protests at Glenwood Park opening.

More about visitability

More about the Inclusive Home Design Act

The contradiction is that, by and large, the homes constructed in these "ideal" communities are neither livable nor visitable by people with mobility impairments-- and not a wise choice for temporarily able-bodied older people, either. New Urbanists have been the chief designers who, beginning in the 1980's, brought back the "classic" multi-stepped houses with front porches high above grade -- houses that are worse for disabled and older people than the typical house styles of 40's, 50's, 60's, 70's -- this at a time when the aging of the population is a widely reported trend, and younger disabled people are surviving longer than ever before.

After several years of mainly fruitless advocacy by the Disability Rights Action Coalition for Housing (known as DRACH) and Concrete Change, a number of visitability advocates from Georgia and New York expressed their displeasure by clogging the hall at the 2002 New Urbanist national conference in New York City, some of us lying on the floor with signs reading: "Nostalgic Front Stoop. Please step over."

This resulted in a meeting with the board, program participation opportunities at two following conferences, and through the work of Access Living in Chicago, a letter of support from the Chicago-based Congress for the New Urbanism board.of directors for the federal Inclusive Home Design Act legislation.


New Glenwood Park home with lots of steps.

But in practice New Urbanists still crank out dense communities of new, grossly inaccessible homes.

Visitability advocates in Atlanta worked hard at educating the developers of the much-ballyhooed projected New Urbanist community, Glenwood Park, for several years before ground was broken, because it was clear that community would be held up as a model for years to come.

Checking and photographing the houses under construction, Atlanta-area Concrete Change participants were outraged to see that inaccessibility was rampant, with steps at every entrance -- in many cases so steep they could never be retrofitted, let alone visited by a disabled friend -- and narrow bathroom doors.

Besides the balloons, activists handed out house-shaped fans that said, "Basic Access to Every New Home: One zero-step entrance, 32-inch doors!"

So, at Glenwood Park's grand opening in June, fifteen wheelchair users and nine walking supporters arrived, representing DRACH, ADAPT, People First, and Georgia Voices That Count.

The advocates circulated among the crowd, distributing fliers and carrying balloons that said

"Welcome-If Not Disabled" and passing out house-shaped fans that said, "Basic Access to Every New Home: One zero-step entrance, 32-inch doors!" The strategy was to have a multitude of personal conversations with the attendees.

By time the formal grand opening program took place, much of the crowd understood and supported our issue. There was loud applause when a Glenwood Park developer announced from the stage that, although they had done many things right in their new development, they had fumbled on visitability. He pledged to hold a training of their builders.

I will be presenting the training, and advocates will be watching to see what actually occurs in practice as the next houses go up.

Posted July 11, 2005.

Eleanor Smith is the founder of Concrete Change.

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NEW TOWNS
JULY/AUGUST 2008

Taking Accessibility a Few Steps Further

By Ruth Walker

"An opportunity for homebuilders." That's how an article in the summer issue of the Journal of the American Planning Association (JAPA) refers to the lack of accessible housing in the United States.

The article continues: "In light of concerns about the civil rights of people with disabilities and the high public cost of nursing home care, housing accessibility is a critical issue for planners and policymakers as well." The JAPA research found that most new single-family houses built today will be inhabited at some point by someone with a disability.

The article was by Stanley K. Smith and Stefan Rayer of the University of Florida, along with Eleanor Smith. As executive director of the national organization Concrete Change, Smith is the country's leading advocate of visitability.

In an interview Smith suggested that the question isn't, "How many people have disabilities?" ("That's a tiny slice.") Rather it's, "How many houses, over their 75- to 100-year lives, will be home to someone who has a disability?" The researchers estimated that a newly built, single-family detached unit has a 60 percent chance of housing at least one resident with severe long-term mobility limitations and a 25 percent probability of housing someone with "self-care limitations."

"When disabled visitors are accounted for, the probabilities rise to 91 percent and 53 percent respectively," the authors added.

Other developments on the visitability/accessibility agenda this summer:

. AARP, the seniors' lobby, is publishing a major paper on visitability, due out in July.
• Regulations for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) are being updated; a 60-day period for public comment is under way this summer.
. "A Pattern Book on Inclusive Housing" is to be published late this summer or early this fall.

The pattern book is the work of Edward Steinfeld, professor of architecture and director of the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the University of Buffalo, and his colleagues. "It will provide guidance for block design, site design and house design, in both traditional and more modern styles, and across a range of price points," Steinfeld said. "It will be new urbanist as well as accessible."

The Justice Department says revision of the ADA guidelines is intended to make them "more consistent with model building codes and industry standards in order to make compliance easier." Steinfeld hailed the new guidelines as something new urbanists should get behind -- in part to forestall a more stringent regime.

Building Types on the 'Endangered Species List'?

New urbanists have not warmed to the access agenda as advocates like Smith would like, however. She was co-chair of the accessibility initiative of the Congress for the New Urbanism but resigned from CNU after what she considered a disappointing session on accessibility at CNU XV in Philadelphia in 2007.

At CNU XVI in Austin this year, Bruce F. Donnelly, an urban planner from the Cleveland area, voiced his concern about the access agenda: "The bottom line for many of us is that we don't want to rule out building types." A particular concern: walk-up residential buildings of one to three units.

In a follow-up interview, he explained, "Whatever happens, no historic building type should be abandoned for a single reason." He also worries that "guidelines tend to be written as if traditional building types didn't exist." And he lamented what he described as a lack of "a mechanism for codifying traditional building types."

Concrete Change promotes the three-point visitability standard -- by ordinance if possible (as in Tucson, Ariz., as of last fall), by voluntary compliance otherwise:

. A zero-step entry, which may be from the rear or through a garage;
. Interior doors at least 32 inches wide;
. A main floor bathroom (at least half-bath) that is accessible by wheelchair.

Visitability is a less stringent standard than full accessibility but is being promoted more universally -- to cover all new residential construction. On only 5 percent of building lots does the slope make a zero-step entrance not feasible, Smith estimated, adding that visitability features add only $100 to $500 to the cost of a new home.

Visitability and accessibility tend to get lumped together, however. And the ADA draws particular fire from builders and developers, who say it lacks an administrative mechanism and is instead "enforced by lawsuit."

"Visitability is not intended to exclude anything," Steinfield said. Some types of housing can be hard to make visitable, he said, notably carriage houses and apartments over garages, residential units over commercial buildings, and live-work units. But his new pattern book will have some solution for all of these, he promised.

By Smith's reckoning, just one building type is likely to "go extinct": a dwelling with a few steps down to the basement and a few steps up to the first floor. "And so what?" But she stressed that she's "all for density" and rejected the charge that the visitability standard will put everyone in a high-rise or a ranch house.

A Paradoxical Relationship

A paradox is at work here. On one hand, steps are inherent to new urbanism. Multistory dwellings help make density possible and help reclaim the middle ground between sprawl and downtown. And new urbanists respect the traditional architecture of the communities in which they build. That can mean building multistory townhouses or even mean houses on stilts.

On the other hand, new urbanism is good fit for people with disabilities in so many way. "The really big issue is the design and location of communities," Carol Wyant, executive director of the Form-Based Codes Institute in Chicago, observed recently. "The tight ped shed" is a real help to those with disabilities, and a community's "car dependence" is a major limitation for them. As she spoke, from a coffee shop in walkable Alameda, Calif., she noted that someone in a motorized wheelchair had just whizzed by -- as if to reinforce her point.

Steve Mouzon of the Urban Guild said in an interview, "For a long time I was firmly on the side of rejecting visitability." Being asked to design a raised Katrina cottage with its zero-step entrance at the front proved to be eye-opening, however. He devised a side ramp to bring a wheelchair user to the porch and the front door.

The experience has made him wonder what other possibilities he may have overlooked. As time permits, he's working on a slope-development toolkit to let a builder calculate how to site a house on a lot to give it a zero-step entrance. A builder will need to plug in only a few numbers -- the elevation of the four corners of the lot, along with its width, depth and front-yard setback -- and presto! Out will come the information needed. Mouzon speculated that some of the resistance to stairs may be modernist resistance against traditional architecture, with its literal and symbolic "elevation" of important structures. He suspects some modernists may be using the disability issue to be able to "cut traditional buildings off at the knees."

The Psychology of Porches and the 'Geometry of Relationships'

Like steps, porches are another quintessentially new urbanist element that is problematic for wheelchairs. Mouzon's studies of what he calls the "geometry of relationships" tell him that height above street level helps determine whether a porch actually gets used. On a "defensible" porch several feet up, people will feel secure and engage passersby in conversation. If not elevated, a porch needs considerable depth to "protect" sitters.

Mouzon also said, "Universal design for everyone is a myth," and called for some other term, "nimble design," perhaps, to refer to design that doesn't try to be all things to all people but rather includes adjustable elements. Some accessibility features, such as curb cuts, have "no downside," as he put it. But a kitchen counter at the right height for someone in a wheelchair is manifestly the wrong height for someone who will use the counter standing up, he said.

Issues of access and mobility are personal for Connie Moran, mayor of Ocean Springs, Miss., and a new member of the board of the Congress for the New Urbanism. An economic development professional by trade, she's also the mother of a 13-year-old daughter with cerebral palsy and the daughter of an octogenarian mother who uses a cane.

Moran is eager to go beyond the standards of the ADA and resists the idea of having to choose between accesibility and good design. "Why can't we have both?"

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Common ground found for urbanism and the disabled

ROBERT STEUTEVILLE (/node/538) APR. 1, 2009

"Lifelong Communities" charrette spurs a warming of relations between new urbanists and disability-rights activists.

The Atlanta Regional Commission had Andres Duany lead a charrette in February aimed at helping municipal and county governments foster "Lifelong Communities" — places where people can comfortably live from childhood to old age.

The Commission, which promotes planning in the 10-county Atlanta region, is using the Lifelong Communities Initiative to produce policies, programs, and designs that will allow individuals and families to remain in a neighborhood as they age, even if their physical or mental abilities become impaired.

For Duany, the Miami architect, and for Eleanor Smith, the Atlanta-based founder of the disability rights organization Concrete Change, the charrette turned into an opportunity to forge agreement on at least some elements of a joint agenda. As a result of the discussions, Duany acted to "ensure that all mandates for elevated entries will be removed from the SmartCode," said Scott Ball, charrette project manager for Duany Plater-Zyberk & Co. (DPZ).

"What I'm happy about is that there's been a shift in the thinking," Smith said at the conclusion of the week-long charrette. "The dialogue was really different — more cooperative and less antagonistic than

in the past. So hopefully we're at a turning point."

Over the past several years, Concrete Change has criticized new urbanist house and apartment building designs that put entrances one or more steps above ground level — a height that makes porches more habitable and give interiors more privacy from the street, but at the expense of preventing wheelchair-bound people from entering.

Smith and others have advocated that except in unusual circumstances, each residential unit should have a "zero-step" entrance. If an at-grade entrance cannot be provided at the front door, Smith has said, a barrier-free side or rear entrance would generally be acceptable.
New urbanists have become more receptive to access for the disabled since the issue first flared up at a

Congress for New Urbanism annual conference in New York in 2001, but Smith says too many new urban developments continue to be built with barriers to people in wheelchairs. Calls for eliminating such barriers through laws and building codes have been resisted by new urbanists, in part because government enforcement tends to end up being excessively rigid.

"Every federal agency has a different way of saying what applies when," Ball lamented. Federal codes are "byzantine and irrational," he said, whereas what's needed is guidance that is "rational and clear."

Progress in Atlanta
The Lifelong Communities Initiative, supported by AARP and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, argues that accessibility is becoming essential because the average lifespan is now 78 for men and 81 for women — much more than the 49-year US life expectancy in 1900. Individuals now live for many years with ailments and conditions that would have been fatal in an earlier era.

"The AARP," Duany said, "is bouncing back from somewhat failed experiments," such as senior housing, which is often set so far apart from the rest of the community that it generates isolation and inactivity. Older Americans increasingly say they prefer to continue living in places made up of people in a broad range of ages, and in walkable communities. Ball, citing research by Zimmerman/Volk Associates, said, "Baby boomers don't like age-segregated, gated communities as much as an earlier generation did." Duany told a charrette session, "You need to have neighborhoods again."

He and the DPZ team brought together experts in health care, aging, mobility, transportation, accessibility, architecture, planning, and design. They explored how to make it possible for people to remain in their homes and communities for as long as they desire. The endeavor was based on the premise that it will be impossible to meet the needs of the growing older adult population with supportive programs or innovations in health care alone; what's required is a rethinking of the way we plan for and regulate the built environment.

Among the charrette's conclusions:
• Communities intended for lifelong occupancy must adhere to New Urbanism's fundamental principles.

Walkability, a mixture of uses, and a mix of building types should be seen as making neighborhoods more versatile and convenient.

• Accessibility standards should take into account not only the individual building (as in building codes) but also the walkability and accessibility of entire urban and suburban environments. Ball called the new objective "comprehensive environmental accessibility." Kathryn Lawler, the Commission's lead organizer for the charrette, reiterated that point, noting that walkable urbanism and the well-being of older people require attention to the whole scale and spectrum of the human habitat, "from the bathroom to the door handle, to the street, to getting on the bus, to getting downtown."

• Accessibility to buildings should be maximized in places where pedestrian and transit accessibility is greatest. Lawler suggested that zoning policy could require a certain level of accessibility in all units, and mandate greater accessibility for units located near town centers and transit connections.

• Traditional building forms must be modified to reflect the fact that people are living longer, often with disabilities or chronic health problems. In Lifelong Communities, a zero-step entry should be provided for as many houses, apartments, and other buildings as possible. If new urbanist designs call for stoops, elevated porches, and other building elements that create barriers in front, especially careful attention must then be paid to side or rear entry alternatives.

The consensus of charrette participants was that over the past 40 years, federally mandated accessibility standards would have achieved greater results if they had been formulated within a zoning framework rather than relying solely on building codes.

Ball said that generally, communities should begin to conceive their accessibility goals broadly — as improvements in overall livability — rather than in terms of extracting specialized concessions from developers. This broader approach might include offering developers greater density, offsetting the burden of being required to make building modifications.

Smith continues to take a more aggressive approach to access than new urbanists. "I'm very adamant about single-family detached; the vast majority lend themselves to a zero-step entry," Smith told New Urban News. When privacy is an issue, it can typically be achieved through other means, such as greenery or low walls, she said. New urbanists may find fault with that idea, Ball indicated. "Duany has taken the position that anything you do that pushes houses farther apart and perpetuates a suburban condition is undesirable," Ball noted.

Nobody should build townhouses above retail, Smith insisted, because those units will be inaccessible to the disabled. A good alternative would be two or three layers of flats, which "look exactly like townhouses above retail, but which have an elevator," allowing anyone to live or visit there. Smith's approach would make popular new urban building types, like fee-simple live-work units and stacked townhouses, difficult to build.

On the other hand, Smith is not opposed to small apartment buildings with accessible ground-floor units and walkup second-floor units. Those are "not built a great deal," she said, and their ground-floor

units can provide barrier-free living.

The charrette team created plans for six model projects of differing kinds across metropolitan Atlanta, including a town center that Duany said could be built on the site of a dying suburban mall. Instead of building elderly housing and senior centers where land is cheapest, these facilities should be built where there's access to transportation and a mix of activities, he argued. Most of the six projects involve partnerships between a developer and a municipality. There's a strong chance that four of the projects will be implemented, according to Ball.

To examine Lifelong Communities issues further, the Commission has started to develop a set of standards at the building, street, community and regional scales. It will be up to each municipality or county to decide whether and how to act on the charrette's ideas and standards.

Robert Steuteville is editor of Public Square: A CNU Journal and senior communications adviser for the Congress for the New Urbanism.

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