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WALKABILITY / VISITABILITY

Description:

The characteristics of a home, of public buildings, and of community spaces can either enhance or impede the ability of residents to live as independently as possible and as integrated with the wider community as much as possible throughout their lifetimes. The design concepts of *walkability* and *visitability* have been found to benefit communities and to improve the quality of life of its residents.

Walkability has been defined by Dan Burden, a nationally known expert on the principles underlying this design concept, as the quality of “the overall walking and living conditions in an area—the extent to which the built environment is friendly to the presence of people who are walking, living, shopping, visiting, enjoying, or spending time in an area”¹ . . . how comfortable, convenient, and safe it is for people to do these things.

Across the country, greater attention is being focused on exercise, fitness, being active, and staying involved—for better mental and physical health. A community with good walkability features encourages walking, strolling, and biking as a strategy for achieving improved health and increased and enhanced interaction among residents. Greater attention is also being focused on walking and biking as alternative transportation strategies for reducing the use of personal cars, conserving fossil fuels, and improving air quality. There is growing awareness and appreciation of the role that walkability plays in supporting health and environmental aims, as well as growing recognition of the economic benefits accruing to a community whose walkable design characteristics attract both residents and visitors from other places.

What are some examples of elements that help make a community walkable: How comfortable is it for residents to walk around their neighborhoods? Are sidewalks needed—to make walking more enticing, safer? Are sidewalks unbroken, made of non-slip materials, free of sand and debris in the summer and snow and ice in the winter? Are there curb cuts to the street? Are there leash laws? Are there street lights, and are traffic signals timed to allow small children, elderly people, and people with disabilities enough time to safely cross the street? Are there benches for sitting and resting? Water fountains? Walking paths? Are there pathways for bicycling, skateboarding, and rollerblading separate from sidewalks and from the auto roadway? Can people walk to the bus stop? Is there a bus shelter? Are street signs, building signs, and street numbers large and visible? Are there walking trails in public parks; do they include rest stops; is there built-in equipment to engage in exercises that improve agility, stamina, and strength? Is there a mapped walking trail through town that brings walkers and shoppers to points of interest, the major amenities, and stores? Are indoor walking trails

incorporated into community centers, schools, malls, YMCAs, and senior housing developments to encourage walking and to encourage integration of different age groups? What are the distances among local amenities and stores . . . and between residential areas and routine destinations—and, thus, what is a resident's ability to easily get to the goods and services he needs and wants? Are there buffers between pedestrian walkways and moving traffic? What is the level of connectedness among streets? What is the frequency of street-crossings? What is the level of traffic volume and traffic speed? Is the neighborhood, the community, or the downtown visually appealing? Does the placement of buildings and stores instill a sense of safety . . . instead of a fear of crime? What is the quality of the air; is there sun; is there shade?

A number of tools, checklists, and audit workshops have been developed to help residents, local leaders, and planners understand the elements of walkability and to gauge just how walkable their own communities are. Increasingly, such measures are making their way into formal and informal community planning efforts. As an initial informal measure, "one of the best ways to quickly determine how walkable a block, corridor, or neighborhood is is to count the number of people walking, lingering, and enjoying a space—the diversity of people, and especially the presence of children, seniors, and people with disabilities, denotes the quality, completeness, and wholesomeness of a walkable space."²

Visitability refers to the design of a home so that it can be easily entered and exited by the home's residents, easily visited by other people, and easily used by residents and visitors, including those with frailties and disabilities. The principles of visitability also apply to public and commercial buildings. What are the primary features that make a home or building visitable: (1) There is at least one no-step entrance; (2) there is a bathroom on the first floor, capable of being negotiated by a person who is using a wheelchair or who has a temporary or permanent physical limitation; (3) exterior and interior doorways are wider to accommodate a wheelchair or walker; and (4) in public buildings, an elevator is available to access upper floors.

How critical are visitability features? A 2007 study³ by the University of Florida's Bureau for Economic and Business Research estimated that up to 60 per cent of new houses built today will, at some point, have a resident with a long-term mobility impairment. Many people with permanent or temporary mobility issues are 'trapped' in their homes because they cannot negotiate stairs to the outside. Just as they may not be able to get out of their homes, many of their friends and family who are just as frail or mobility-impaired are not able to get in—or, once inside the home, have no access to the bathroom . . . so they stop visiting. It is important for frail older people and people with limited mobility conditions to maintain their social relationships. Social isolation is strongly related to depression; staying involved with family, friends, and others in a social network is strongly related to positive health and well-being.

Initially, the concept of visitability was recognized as an aspect of home design that was crucial to the ability of elderly people to successfully age in place.

Increasingly, however, the benefits of visitability—easy and safe access and maneuverability—became clear for people of all ages: small children; people in wheel chairs; those with walkers and canes; those in a temporary leg cast; those with permanent physical limitations; and those with reduced strength, agility, and balance due to health conditions or aging.

Walkability and visitability—both concepts are aspects of *universal design*, affecting how useable and how safely and easily negotiable residents will find their neighborhoods, communities, and homes to be—throughout their lifetime. The extent to which communities and homes are walkable and visitable affects residents' health and well-being, as well as their satisfaction with their homes and community . . . and, thus, both their *ability* to remain living in their community and their *willingness* to continue living in their community.

References:

¹ Dan Burden, Walkable Communities, and Glattig Jackson Kercher Anglin, Inc. (September, 2008), *Walkability Sault Ste.Marie*:
<http://www.sault-sainte-marie.mi.us/docs/walkabilityaudit.pdf>.

² David Herron (January 18, 2009), "Walkability and Walkable Cities," *Seven Generational Ruminations Newsletter*.

³ Stanley K. Smith (University of Florida), Stefan Rayer (University of Florida), and Eleanor A. Smith (Concrete Change) (October 11-13, 2007), *Aging and Disability: Implications for the Housing Industry, and Public Policy in the United States*. Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Demographic Association, Birmingham, AL.

Benefits:

Walkability:

- Provides easy opportunities for improving fitness, strength, and agility among all residents—(1) helping older people remain independent and self-managing for longer periods of time, and (2) countering obesity trends among all age groups.
- Incorporating walkability features in and around one's home and throughout the community is a preventive and wellness strategy for better health and reducing the need for long-term care services.
- A walkable community encourages interaction and communication among the various age groups and cultural groups. This is particularly critical for frail older people and people with disabilities, both of whom have a greater vulnerability to social isolation.

Visitability:

- For frail older people and people of all ages with mobility impairments, visitable homes and public buildings encourage socialization and involvement with family, friends, and the wider community—countering social isolation and depression.

- Visitable homes increase the ability of residents to be self-managing, thereby lessening the need for costly personal care.
- Designing a new home to be visitable reduces or eliminates the need for expensive renovations when a resident incurs a frailty or mobility impairment.

For the community:

- The outcome of walkable and visitable homes and communities is greater interaction and communication among residents, which strengthens community-building and a "sense of community" among residents.
- Both walkability and visitability are critical aspects of a livable community (see "Livable Communities" in the *Resource Manual*).
- The more walkable a community is, the lower the crime rate.
- Walkable communities reduce reliance on the personal car, conserve fossil fuels, and help improve air quality.
- Communities that are walkable have improved economies.

Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:

Visitability:

- Developer/planner misperceptions—visitability features may be dismissed because of untrue convictions, such as:
 - A mistaken idea that a building's lot must be flat to accommodate a zero-step entrance;
 - An unproven belief that a home built with accessible and visitable features will be marketable only to people with disabilities;
 - An inaccurate view that only a few people need the benefits of visitability or universal design features; and
 - An incorrect assumption that the cost of incorporating visitability features in new construction is prohibitive.
- There is a lack of knowledge among many homeowners and developers about the choices and décor possibilities in architectural features, products, and designs for visitability features, leading to a conviction that visitability features "cannot be attractive." This conviction leads both homeowners and developers to fear that such features will be "too noticeable" and will stigmatize the residents as being disabled.

Walkability:

- The movement promoting smart growth principles, which supports walkable, more compact communities and less reliance on the use of personal automobiles, is in its beginning stages. While such principles are being incorporated into newly planned communities, a greater "culture change" is

required to prompt widespread attention to making substantial walkability changes to existing communities.

- Creating a walkable community requires a collaborative, cross-sector planning effort among disparate agencies responsible for transportation, housing, parks and recreation, commercial building, services, education, and others. Many communities have had little or no experience in using such a planning approach; they are unaware of planning tools available to help communities implement such an approach; and smaller agencies are often fearful of losing their place in the community if they are part of a larger endeavor.

Resource—examples:

- Dan Burden, *How Can I Find and Help Build a Walkable Community?* Excellent article providing descriptive and explanatory information about a list of successfully walkable communities, written by the country's foremost expert on the topic:
<http://www.walkable.org/assets/downloads/How%20Can%20I%20Find%20and%20Help%20Build%20a%20Walkable%20Community.pdf>.
- "What are some examples of existing walkable communities?" *Walkable.org: faq*.
<http://www.walkable.org/faqs.html>.
- "America's Most Walkable Neighborhoods," *Walk Score*:
<http://www.walkscore.com/rankings/>.
<http://www.walkscore.com/walkable-neighborhoods.shtml>.
http://www.walkscore.com/rankings/New_York.
Explanation of the methodology *Walk Score* uses to score and rank the walkability of neighborhoods: <http://www.walkscore.com/rankings/ranking-methodology.shtml>.

Resource—written and web:

- Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access (2009), *Visitability—an inclusive design approach to housing*:
 - Extensive information, examples, photos, and guidelines;
 - Summary of the new section (C units) of the ICC/ANSI A117.1 standards, which stipulates technical design criteria for visitability.Buffalo, NY: The IDEA Center at Buffalo, School of Architecture and Planning, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York.
<http://www.udeworld.com/visbooklet/visitabilitybooklet.pdf>.
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/>.
- Jennifer Perry, (nd), "ANSI Endorses 'Visitability' Criteria: the American National Standards Institute Includes Criteria to Make New Homes Visitible by People with Disabilities," *Action Online—Magazine of the Spinal Association*. Includes summary of criteria for Type C units:
<http://www.unitedspinal.org/publications/action/2008/04/08/ansi-endorses-%E2%80%9Cvisitability%E2%80%9D-criteria/>.

- Stanley K. Smith, Stefan Rayer, and Eleanor A. Smith (October 11-13, 2007), *Aging and Disability: Implications for the Housing Industry and Public Policy in the United States*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Demographic Association, Birmingham, AL. University of Florida, Bureau of Economic and Business Research:
http://www.bebr.ufl.edu/files/Aging_Disability_0.pdf.
- *Walkable Communities*—the Web site of Dan Burden, nationally recognized authority on bicycle and pedestrian facilities and programs, with 25 years experience developing, promoting, and evaluating alternative transportation facilities, traffic calming practices, sustainable community design, and specializing in research and implementation of pedestrian, bicycle, and street improvement projects: <http://www.walkable.org/>.
 - Dan Burden, *Walkable Communities—Twelve Steps for an Effective Program*: Florida Department of Transportation:
<http://www.walkable.org/assets/downloads/12STEPS.pdf>.
"What Makes a Community Walkable"—the 12 steps:
<http://www.walkable.org/faqs.html>.
 - Dan Burden, *Bicycle Network Planning*—video presentation:
<http://www.slideshare.net/rendo/dan-burden-presentation>.
For community planners: Dan Burden, *Building Livable, Walkable Communities*—video presentation:
http://fora.tv/2008/07/14/Dan_Burden_Building_Livable_Walkable_Communities#Dan_Burden_on_Educating_City_Planners_and_Engineers.
- "Walkability Audit Tool," *Healthier Worksite Initiative*. Developed by the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services' Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/hwi/toolkits/walkability/audit_tool.htm.
http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpao/hwi/downloads/walkability_audit_tool.pdf.
- *Walkability Checklist—How Walkable Is Your Community?* Developed by the Safe Routes, Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center, U. S. Department of Transportation, and the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency:
http://katana.hsrb.unc.edu/cms/downloads/walkability_checklist.pdf.
- Jordana Maisel, Eleanor Smith, and Edward Steinfeld (August, 2008), *Increasing Home Access: Designing for Visitability*. Washington, DC: Public Policy Institute, AARP. http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/2008_14_access.pdf.
- Center for Livable Communities (1999), "The Economic Benefits of Walkable Communities," *Focus on Livable Communities*. Sacramento, CA: Local Government Commission.
http://www.lgc.org/freepub/docs/community_design/focus/walk_to_money.pdf.
- U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (on line, 2011), *Aging Initiative*, "Building Healthy Communities for Active Aging Awards"—The principal goal of the awards program is to raise awareness across the nation about healthy

synergies that can be achieved when communities combine and implement the principles of smart growth with the concepts of active aging. Applicants are evaluated based on the overall effectiveness of their programs, level of community involvement and outreach, use of innovative approaches, and overall environmental and health benefits of the project. Description of the four 2010 award-winning projects and three prior award-winning projects, including contact information: <http://www.epa.gov/aging/bhc/awards/2010/index.html>.