

Accessibility in Our Built Environment: Visitability

The ability of individuals to freely interact, navigate, and integrate within their environments is an inherent need – one that all too often may be taken for granted. The National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services has supported a variety of efforts to directly address such issues and enhance accessibility within our built environment through the concept of universal design.

Universal Design - a NIDRR Perspective

NIDRR has worked to promote universal design through funding a variety of research projects and incorporating the principles of universal design into its Long-Range Plan (1999-2003):

“Universal design principles can be applied to the built environment, information technology, and telecommunications, transportation, and consumer products. These technological systems are basic to community integration, education, employment, health, and economic development. The application of universal design principles during the research and development stage would incorporate the widest range of human performance into technological systems. Universal design applications may result in the avoidance of costly retrofitting of systems in use and the possible reduction in the need to develop orphan products” (NIDRR Long-Range Plan 1999-2003, pg. 53).

Ron Mace, RERC on Universal Design - NCSU

The roots of universal design can be traced to pioneering architect Ron Mace (1941-1998), who first envisioned a design concept guaranteeing the greatest access and usability to all, regardless of age or ability, while maintaining aesthetic appeal. Mace's influential work proved instrumental in passing both the Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988 and the Americans with

Disabilities Act of 1990, and his efforts also helped to establish the Rehabilitation Engineering and Research Center (RERC) on Universal Design at North Carolina State University (NCSU), a NIDRR-supported and internationally regarded authority on universal design. See: <http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/center/history/ronmace.htm>

Evolution of Visitability

Over the last decade, a new front has emerged alongside the universal design movement. Known as visitability, this increasingly popular application of universal design fuses together the concepts of accessibility and community integration and has taken great strides toward achieving widespread acceptance, thanks to the work of Eleanor Smith, an Atlanta disability activist and founder of Concrete Change. The philosophy she established emanates from the belief that people with mobility difficulties should be afforded basic access to newly constructed homes in order for them to be “visitable” or accessible. Rather than requiring a long, complicated and expensive list of home modifications, visitability requires only three simple and practical provisions:

- A no-step entrance;
- Doorways wide enough to accommodate entry by people and wheelchairs; and
- A main floor bathroom with a doorway and space sufficient to enter with a wheelchair and close the door.

Principles of Universal Design*

Principle One

Equitable Use

The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities.

Principle Two

Flexibility in Use

The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities.

Principle Three

Simple and Intuitive Use

Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level.

Principle Four

Perceptible Information

The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities.

Principle Five

Tolerance for Error

The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions.

Principle Six

Low Physical Effort

The design can be used efficiently and comfortably and with a minimum of fatigue.

Principle Seven

Size and Space for Approach and Use

Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of user's body size, posture, or mobility.

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* The Principles of Universal Design were conceived and developed by the Center for Universal Design at North Carolina State University. Use or application of the Principles in any form by an individual or organization is separate and distinct from the Principles and does not constitute or imply acceptance or endorsement by The Center for Universal Design of the use or application.

These three tenets of visitability are intended to bring benefit to all people, and while visitability most immediately affects persons with mobility impairments, it also serves the notion that, as residents age and the chances of acquiring a disability increase, visitable homes are easier to modify for any special mobility needs. This empowers homeowners to maintain their independence as they age rather than finding themselves compelled to prematurely or unnecessarily leave their homes (*Visitability: An Approach to Universal Design in Housing*, pgs. 1-4, RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo).

For further information about Concrete Change, see <http://www.concretechange.org/>

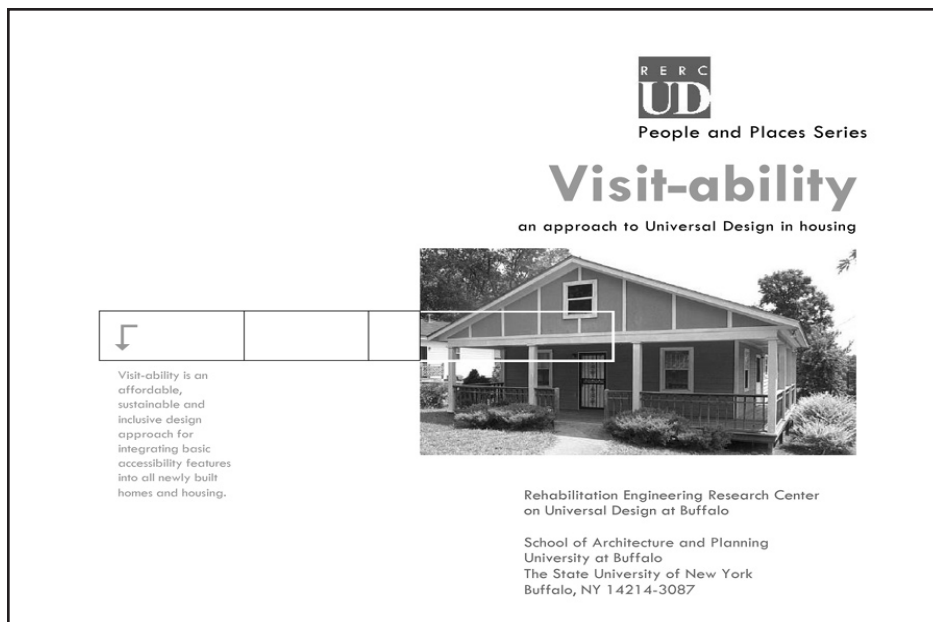
RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo

The NIDRR-supported RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo has collaboratively developed their Visitability Initiative to cultivate new accessibility strategies, alternatives, and audiences. According to the RERC, "The Visitability Initiative is based on the conviction that inclusion of basic architectural access features in all new homes is a civil and human right and improves livability for all." See: <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/>

With NIDRR sponsorship, this initiative has created and made accessible several resources committed to broadening the influence, appeal, and real-world application of visitability. A list of resources available through the RERC's Web site includes an online tutorial, an electronic visitability discussion group, and a comprehensive informational booklet outlining the costs, benefits, myths, and advocacy strategies behind visitability. See the resources section at the end of this document.

RRTC on Independent Living Management at Buffalo

In addition to the two RERCs on Universal Design, NIDRR has also supported work at the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Independent Living Management (RRTC-ILM) at Buffalo to enhance information and training materials at community-based Centers for Independent Living. The RRTC-ILM has recently completed development of a tutorial on compact disc which compiles information from the RERCs on universal design as well as Concrete Change into a comprehensive dissemination and education tool for visitability. *Visitability: A Computer Based Tutorial* is available from the RRTC-ILM (info@ilm.wnyilp.org) and is located on the RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo's Visitability Initiative Web site: <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/>



Visit-ability: An Approach to Universal Design in Housing, is a 48-page resource offering a comprehensive overview of visitability requirements, the philosophy of the initiative, and resources in the United States.

This booklet was compiled and developed as a publication of the NIDRR-supported RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo with the assistance of Habitat for Humanity chapters in both Buffalo, N.Y. and Rochester, N.Y.

Applications

The dedicated and imaginative work of NIDRR-supported RERCs and RRTC, in association with community advocacy groups such as Concrete Change, has led to not only significant advancements in strategies and awareness of visitability but to instances of real-world implementation as well. Along with policies adopted by organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, several cities have developed ordinances that establish guidelines for building and making available visitable public housing. An increasing number of state governments are also currently considering various pieces of visitability legislation, and the federal government has followed suit with the introduction of H.R. 2353 into the U.S. House of Representatives in June of 2003 by Rep. Jan Schakowsky of Illinois. H.R. 2353 requires that all federally supported single family housing feature a no-step entrance, 32" clearance doorways on the main floor, and a wheelchair-accessible bathroom also on the main floor. Further information about H.R. 2353 is available at <http://www.drach.org/>

A catalog of current and pending visitability legislation is available at the RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo's Web site <http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/>

Resources

As public interest continues to grow, so does the list of accessible visitability resources available through NIDRR grantees. The following online resources may be accessed to enhance understanding of visitability and its many beneficial applications within community settings.

Concrete Change

- Concrete Change Web site:
<http://www.concretechange.org/>

Disability Rights Action Coalition for Housing (DRACH)

- DRACH Web site:
<http://www.drach.org/>

RERC on Universal Design at Buffalo

- Designing Accessible Environments
http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/publications/descriptions/pub_desc4.html#assenv
 - a) Online Demonstration
http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/publications/descriptions/pub_demo.html
 - b) Primer on Accessible Design
http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/publications/descriptions/pub_desc3.html
- Existing Local Visitability Laws
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/existing%20city%20laws.htm>
- Existing State Visitability Laws
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/existing%20state%20laws.htm>
- Programs of the IDEA Center
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/programs/programs.html>

- Universal Design Survey
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/UDsurvey.html>
- *Visit-ability: An Approach to Universal Design in Housing*
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/rercud/visitability/VisBk%20Ver3-7-03.pdf>
- Visitability Discussion List
<http://listserv.buffalo.edu/archives/visitability-list.html>
- Visitability Initiative
<http://www.ap.buffalo.edu/idea/visitability/>

RERC on Universal Design - NCSU

- Center for Universal Design Projects and Services
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/proj_services/proj_serv.htm
 - a) Research
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/proj_services/services/services.htm#rea
 - b) Design
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/proj_services/services/services.htm#des
 - c) Education and Training
http://design.ncsu.edu/cud/ed_train/edu_train.htm
 - d) Outreach
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/proj_services/services/services.htm#out
- History, Ronald L. Mace, FAIA
<http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/center/history/ronmace.htm>
- Housing and Built Environments
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/built_env/builtenv.htm
 - a) Fair Housing
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/built_env/housing/fair_hous.htm

- b) Home Modifications
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/built_env/housing/home_mod.htm
- c) Built Environment Overview
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/built_env/b_environ/overview_be.htm
- d) Built Environment Laws/Regulations/Standards
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/built_env/b_environ/stnds_laws.htm
- e) Built Environment Publications
<http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/pubs/center/pubslst.htm>

- Principles of Universal Design
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/univ_design/princ_overview.htm
The Center for Universal Design (1997), *The Principals of Universal Design*, Version 2.0
Raleigh, NC: North Carolina State University.
- What is Universal Design?
http://www.design.ncsu.edu/cud/univ_design/ud.htm

RRTC on Independent Living Management at Buffalo

- *Visit-ability: A Computer Based Tutorial*

To obtain a CD tutorial, contact:
Rehabilitation Research & Training Center
on Independent Living Management
The Western New York Independent
Living Project, Inc.
3108 Main Street
Buffalo, New York 14214
Telephone: 716-836-0822 [Voice/TDD]
Fax: 716-835-3967
E-Mail: info@ilm.wnyilp.org
Web site: <http://www.rrtcilm.org/>

Available online: <http://www.ncddr.org/du/products/focus/focus8/>



The NCDDR assists, through information and technical assistance, NIDRR grantees with identifying and crafting dissemination strategies. These strategies are designed to meet the needs of a grantee's unique target audience. NCDDR also analyzes and reports on dissemination trends relevant to disability research.

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