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Visitable housing design in Australia: A case for national regulation

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At Christmas and many other occasions during the year, we expect to visit our friends and family. Yet, many people with disability and older people are denied this pleasure because most homes are not visitable.

A visitable home is designed for anyone and provides access to everyone. Dr Ed Steinfeld, a leading expert on inclusion, says that the adoption of visitability in housing design "ensures that a basic level of accessibility will be provided, and it opens opportunities for participation in community life". A visitable home has three main features:

- an accessible path of travel from the street or parking area to and into the entry
- doors, corridors and living spaces that allow ease of access for most people on the entry level
- one bathroom, shower and toilet that can be used by most people, with reinforced wall areas for grab-rails at a later date

The cost of these features is minimal when included at the design stage.

The Australian housing industry builds more than 150,000 dwellings each year, making it a significant part of the national economy. Australia's homes rank among the largest in the world. We like our homes to be spacious, yet most of us do not consider the needs of people with mobility problems. Many older people and people with disability become isolated and excluded because they cannot find suitable housing for themselves or are not able to visit others in the community.

In 2010, with the



Ensuring your home is visitable during construction could save money down the track.

encouragement of the Australian government and the disability and aged persons sectors, the housing industry agreed to a national design guideline for access, including visitability, called Liveable Housing Design, and a voluntary plan to provide these visitable features in all new housing by 2020.

There would be significant benefits from this agreement for people with disability, older people and their families, parents with children in prams, people who are temporarily injured or ill, and home-based workers. There would also be significant benefits for governments, including savings

to the health, ageing and disability budgets when people remained in their own homes longer and continued to participate in their communities.

The Council of Australian Governments sanctioned this agreement by including it in the National Disability Strategy 2010-2020. Many voluntary guidelines preceded Liveable Housing Design but never before had there been agreed targets to measure its progress. Five years on, the Liveable Housing Design agreement has all but failed. With few exceptions, home builders did not respond to the voluntary strategy, and it is anticipated

that less than five per cent of the 2020 target will be reached.

Upon reflection, there were few benefits for the housing industry – its primary interest, understandably, is to maximise profit at the point of sale and, because most new-home buyers do not consider visitability to be a priority, the market did not demand it. The risk of changing tried and true housing practice for unknown people who might need access in the future was simply too high. A market-driven industry requires regulation, in this case the National Construction Code, to ensure it provides for the common good.

Recent research in the USA

suggests that, given our ageing and disabled population, our preference to relocate and our interest in family and community life, 91 per cent of homes built today will require visitability access for a resident or a visitor within its lifecycle. Yet, it often takes an illness or disability in the family before we are confronted by the inaccessibility of our homes. Modifying a home is 19 times more expensive than including access features in the original design. People with disability and older people have heightened expectations about living and participating in the community, yet they often cannot afford these changes and look to government for financial assistance. The housing industry, on the other hand, anticipates modification work will be a steadily growing business.

So who is responsible for the visitability of our housing in Australia? People with disability can reasonably expect the COAG's National Disability Strategy to take the lead by honouring its commitment of "improved accessibility of the built environment through planning and regulatory systems, to maximise the participation and inclusion of every member of the community". The states' social housing programs, which make up less than five per cent of our housing, now provide visitable access in much of the new stock. This, however, will make little difference to people with disability and older people while the private housing industry does nothing.

COAG has a responsibility to ensure the National Construction Code provides for visitable access in all housing construction so that the housing industry changes its practices and the 2020 target can be reached.



"I have grown in confidence. I am stepping outside my comfort zone and leading a busy life."

Belinda, NDIS participant

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