

# Visitable Homes

## WELCOMING TO ALL

A “model” home is meant to feature the best qualities of any new design. So, when the Bridgwater development in Winnipeg created a show home to spark interest in visitable homes, people in a range of life circumstances began seeing the benefits.

The visitable home, which includes a few design modifications so that anyone can enter and access the main floor without obstacles, has been embraced by both parents pushing strollers, as well as seniors preparing for their elderly years. People with friends and family members who have mobility issues see the benefits right away. Everyone feels more welcome.

It's a relatively new idea in Canada, though the word visitability is already gaining acceptance. There is no mistaking, however, the obvious benefits of visitability in making life a little easier for people at different stages of life. The concept has caught on with homebuyers in Winnipeg.

### Primary features

Visitability has three primary features: one level, no-step entrance (at the front, back or side of the house); wider doorways and clear passageways; and a wheelchair-accessible bathroom on the main floor.

The Bridgwater homes are not fully accessible, which would require a number of other modifications, but as the name suggests, it's possible for people with a disability to enter, exit and interact with everyone inside without needing assistance.

“I met a family at an open house who were very pleased and excited about this design. The husband had a brother who was in a wheelchair. When the brother came to visit, he had to carry him up the steps and into the house. They moved to Bridgwater from a more established neighbourhood into a visitable home so his brother could enter their home as easily as everyone else,” says Dwayne Rewniak, Executive Director for Housing Delivery and Land Development with Manitoba Housing.



*Photo courtesy of Bridgwater development*

### Benefits of Visitable Housing

**Convenience:** There's easy access for aging parents, young children, parents with strollers, visitors who use a wheelchair; as well as for moving heavy items.

**Community:** It creates an accommodating environment for residents of all ages, especially for the elderly, where everyone feels welcome and engaged.

**Comfort:** A spacious open concept with large doorways and hallways makes moving around easier and provides pleasing esthetics; plus there's less risk of falls and injury caused by steps.

**Maintenance:** No front steps makes snow shovelling a little easier in the winter.

Manitoba Housing, a provincial Crown corporation that partners with other governments, community organizations and private groups to create safe and affordable housing, worked with builders to incorporate visitability features into the Bridgwater development. The vision behind the neighbourhood is simple: create housing that is accessible to everyone.

## Foundation for Success

According to the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies' *Bridgwater Case Study*, Manitoba Housing "laid the groundwork" for Bridgwater in some important ways:

**Land development** – Lots were developed with visitable houses in mind, such as split grading, to make constructing a no-step entrance easier.

**Listening** – Workshops with builders and focus groups with consumers reaped valuable feedback on needs and concerns, and achieved "buy in."

**Learning** – Consultants researched visitable housing methods around the world, resulting in information that guided the project development.

**Presentation** – Show homes gave homebuilders and the public concrete examples of visitable housing.

**Professional advice** – The project provided architectural guidelines, which included specific construction requirements related to visitable housing.

**Piloting** – The developer included a small number (14) of visitable houses in the first neighbourhood in the subdivision and then expanded the scope.

**Promotion** – The developer implemented a marketing campaign to inform the public about visitable housing.

## Learning curve

If the idea makes so much sense, why aren't visitable homes everywhere in Canada? "I think initially there was a lack of awareness and education among builders, in both understanding the design and recognizing the demand," says Rewniak. "Because of that learning curve, we didn't just aim for our goal of 50 per cent visitable homes in the development right off the bat. There was a progression."

First, Manitoba Housing put out a request for proposals to builders to design a model home with visitability features. Manitoba Housing then incorporated visitable show homes in its three lot categories of laneless, large laneless and laned lots. The response was positive, though the learning curve was apparent.

For example, one proposed design included the three main visitability features—no steps, wide passageways and a main floor accessible bathroom—but it also included a sunken living room, which would mean those with mobility issues would be left on the fringes. "Builders we work with are coming to better appreciate how some traditional design features can defeat the purpose of visitability. We also have an architect who reviews floor plans and identifies design issues," adds Rewniak.

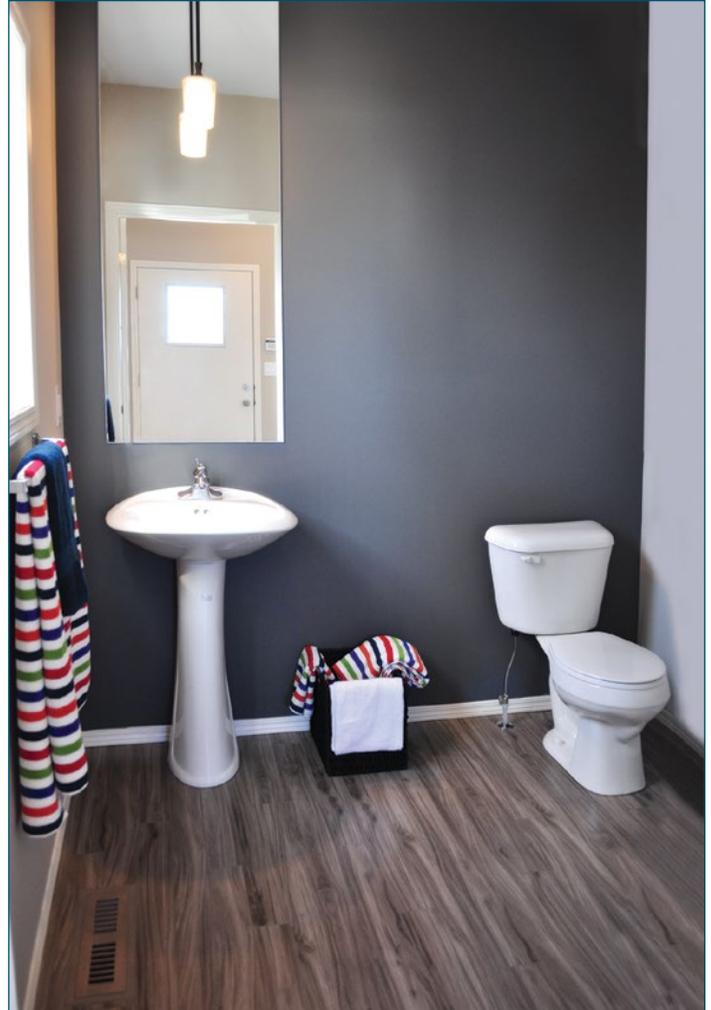


Photo credit: Aleli Estrade  
Ventura Custom Homes Ltd.



The next step was implementation. The housing development includes three residential neighbourhoods Bridgwater Forest, Bridgwater Lakes and Bridgwater Trails. Bridgwater Forest was the first neighbourhood developed in the project and included the show home and an entire street of visitable homes. In the next two neighbourhoods, 50 per cent of the homes will have visitability features. Ultimately, the project will include over 1,000 visitable houses and hundreds of multi-family units with visitability features. Already, hundreds of such homes have been built and occupied.

## Building and design challenges

The benefits of incorporating visitability features does require some trade-offs. The larger main floor bathroom means there is less space available for the living room and kitchen.

There is also some added upfront construction costs for developers, related to the no-step front entrance. Proper lot grading is essential to drainage, driveways and basement windows. That's why lot grading for visitable houses in the Bridgwater neighbourhoods was designed and developed in ways that make it easy to build a no-step front entrance.

The project is unique in that the land was developed with split grading. Split grading made it easier to build no-step entrances in the front and to address drainage problems to the back of the house, which was graded much lower than the front.<sup>1</sup>

As one builder commented in a 2014 case study commissioned by the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies:

*“You can't build a visitable home on just any lot. Sometimes the difference between the elevation of the road and the elevation of the house is too steep that you need steps or a ramp. You have to plan for it when you're doing your creating and moving the land. You're shaping the topography. If the topography doesn't allow it, it won't work.”*



Photo courtesy of the Manitoba government

In order to address these issues, homebuilders had to apply some building techniques that were new to them. However, as another builder noted, once the challenge of a no-step entrance is overcome, other features are easier to incorporate:

*“The majority of new houses built today have a wider doorway at an entrance that can accommodate a wheelchair, a lot of homes are already built with wider hallways and doorways, and you have the open concept.”*

<sup>1</sup> Canadian Centre on Disability Studies, *Bridgwater Case Study*, 2014. <http://visitablehousingcanada.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Final-Bridgwater-Case-Study-Report.pdf>



## Building momentum

After their experience with Bridgwater, some builders tell Dwayne Rewniak, from Manitoba Housing, they are seeing more potential buyers asking about the visitable designs. He often finds that a walk through the neighbourhood provides the validation that visitable housing is a great choice for the future.

*“On one of my recent visits, I bumped into a family with small kids and they talked about how much easier it is to live in this home, whether it is just getting the stroller inside or carrying in groceries or the effort they are spared when moving in large furniture and other pieces,” says Rewniak.*

*He also sees great potential in building more visitable homes to manage the needs of an aging population. “Visitability features will greatly help seniors who want to live independently in their homes, while reducing the risk of falls on the front steps. In fact, if the owner of a visitable home needed to someday make their home fully accessible, it would be much less costly—they’d be well on their way.”*

Today, most homebuilders who were part of the Bridgwater development express confidence in their knowledge and skills in building visitable houses. The project is showing that builders can incorporate these changes and still make a profit. In fact, by 2014, the Bridgwater neighbourhoods were the fastest-selling subdivision in Winnipeg. Visitable houses in the neighbourhoods sold as fast as non-visitable houses.

To help spread the word to other communities and to encourage the development of more visitable housing across Canada, the Canadian Centre on Disability Studies launched [VisitAble Housing Canada](#), which provides a variety of online resources. Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation also provides a range of [Accessible Housing by Design](#) fact sheets.



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