

BACKGROUND ON ACCESSIBLE, ADAPTABLE, UNIVERSAL AND VISITABLE DESIGN

Accessible design is the earliest of the various approaches aimed at modifying conventional building layouts and features to better accommodate persons with a range of capabilities. It grew out of the civil rights movement of the 1960s - "equal opportunity" in the structural sense. It was first advanced through design standards that had to be followed when building or remodeling federal facilities or receiving federal funds. States and communities over time incorporated key requirements into their building codes, which significantly extended their impact.

Accessible building code standards were developed using a generalized model of disability. This model was based largely on the operating characteristics of manual wheelchairs and performance capabilities when using them. Features were also included to address aspects of vision and hearing limitations. The guidelines were intended for simplified, routine application in public/commercial settings (including multi-family housing) that a large cross-section of the population uses. Homes and most other owner-occupied properties were exempted from the code mandates because accessibility features in these settings should be more tailored and/or flexible for residents' specific circumstances.

The term "barrier-free" was a synonym many years ago for accessible design, but isn't used much today.

Adaptable design is an approach first used in public/commercial accessibility guidelines starting in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Its original focus was on providing some flexibility when the mandated features were applied in multi-family rental housing. Key elements, particularly in the kitchen and bathroom, were designed so they could adjust over time for different tenants or if current tenants' needs changed. The technique was also later incorporated into the universal design approach.

Universal design (or "UD") is the most common term used in the United States for a strategy that evolved out of accessible/adaptable design in the late 1980s to early 1990s. Comparable terms here and in other parts of the world include: lifespan design, lifetime design, inclusive design and design for all.

UD focuses on encouraging professionals in housing, consumer products, transportation, communications, and other fields to design beyond the "average adult user model" conventionally relied on in the past. The goal is to create models containing broader performance capabilities for the population as a whole - children, short and very tall adults, those with temporary limitations like pregnancy or a leg injury, persons who are frail or have various disabilities.

In the housing field, UD initially was only viewed as applicable to new construction. However, many of its elements are very appropriate for use in remodeling as well. A wide range of practical features have been identified, and they are often grouped into two broad categories:

- The first is a small set of core, high-priority features borrowed from accessible design that at minimum all homes should contain;
- The second includes many other optional ones, some borrowed from accessible and/or adaptable design, that can be considered according to factors including:
 - Budget, property market value/price point;
 - Frequency of use;
 - Residents' current and future circumstances;
 - Resale potential;
 - Whether new construction or remodeling is involved;
 - Personal preferences.

Visitable design is a concept Concrete Change, a Georgia disability advocacy group, began promoting in the early to mid-1990s. Its original goal was accessibility oriented - to incorporate the following basic features into new homes so persons using wheelchairs and other mobility equipment could easily enter/exit and visit or stay for a time:

- At least one entrance without steps or other rolling/walking obstructions from the yard approach through the doorway;
- An open, main floor plan;
- A first-floor bathroom with an open entrance and floor plan, and panels of "backing" in the walls surrounding the toilet and tub/shower in case grab bars and/or a wall-mounted bench need to be installed in the future;
- Switches and outlets in easy-to-reach locations.

Home UD and visitability were conceptualized in a generally similar time period, and UD's core design features essentially match the set visitability promotes. However, the two approaches initially sought different advocacy goals, and the efforts moved on parallel paths for a number of years. As practitioners in both movements have recognized that they share the overlapping goal of incorporating the core features into home construction and remodeling, collaboration has increased.

Visitability advocates for about a decade have pursued various initiatives around the country to increase the supply of homes containing the core features. Strategies have ranged from various voluntary incentives to mandates. Some of the core features have been promoted in certain communities, while all have been in others. Click on [Strategies, US Locations Promoting Visitability](#) located later in the site for a profile of these efforts.

The visitability concept has evolved over time as well. Concrete Change earlier in the decade expanded the core features to include a main-floor sleeping space - a bedroom or multi-purpose room like a den or adequate square footage that could be converted. It termed this arrangement an "EasyLiving Home," and the organization coordinated with area builders to award certificates to properties meeting the guidelines. The certification process expanded for use in other places around the country, and a nonprofit now manages the process - further information can be found at: www.easylivinghome.org .