



Research Paper

Homeowner and homebuyer impressions of visitable features

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Abstract

Background: Though visitable house features (32+'' wide doors; no-step or low slope entries; and a usable half- or full bathroom on the main floor) have benefits, many developers and builders oppose them because they believe homebuyers do not want them.

Objective: The present study sought to test the accuracy of developer and builder perceived barriers to including visitable features in new houses. Specifically, we tested the desirability of houses with and without such features to homeowners and homebuyers. We hypothesized that homeowners and homebuyers would prefer to buy homes with visitable features even if they believed such homes would cost more.

Methods: In a cross-sectional study, we surveyed 96 homeowners and 107 homebuyers in Ohio. For photos of nine matched pairs of visitable and non-visitable features, respondents assessed home would sell faster, which they preferred to buy, and which had an older inhabitant. They also rated effects of each visitable feature on qualities that might affect the marketability of the home, such as good design, aesthetics, appeal to young, appeal to old, ease of hosting visitors, and resale value.

Results: Both homeowners and homebuyers preferred to buy houses with visitable features, thought they would sell faster, and rated each visitable feature as having favorable effects on the qualities, even though they expected houses with visitable feature to cost more and to house an older person or a person with difficulty walking.

Conclusions: Contrary to developer and builder beliefs, homeowners and homebuyers may prefer houses with visitable features. © 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Accessibility; Universal design; Preference; Livability; Housing satisfaction

“Visitability” is a policy that calls for making homes visitable, that is to enable individuals with ambulatory difficulties to enter and move around a house.¹ It aims to create environments that an individual with mobility or other impairments can visit (get into, get around, and get out) to socialize with friends and family. A cost-effective approach, visitability differs from aging in place and universal design,^{2,3} and unlike the Americans with Disabilities Act,⁴ it can refer to privately- and publicly-owned houses. A house becomes visitable by having: 1) one no-step or

low-slope entrance, 2) doorways at least 32 inches wide, and 3) a usable half- or full bathroom on the main floor.⁵ While it is obviously useful for veterans, aging baby boomers, and others with ambulatory difficulty, visitability can benefit many others as well.² For example, visitable features make it easier to host a guest with an ambulatory difficulty; easier for a resident with a temporary injury; and easier to move a stroller, furniture, or bags of groceries into and around a house.

Although the policy of visitability aims to enable individuals with ambulatory difficulties to enter and move around a house, it may also improve health outcomes and save money by helping people remain in their homes longer as they age. Public funds cover most of the costs associated with nursing home care,⁶ which are \$50,000 per year on average.⁷ Compared to aging in place, nursing home care is more than \$1590 per month more expensive.⁸ There could be substantial cost savings provided by visitable features that assist people to remain in their own homes.

Research indicates that a newly built single-family detached house has a 60 percent chance of eventually housing a resident with a physical limitation, yet more than

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90 percent of single-family housing units in the United States are not accessible for such persons.⁹ Visitability aims to change this situation by ensuring that those with ambulatory difficulties can enter and move around all homes. Relatively young buyers (median age of 32 years for first-time buyers and 42 years for repeat buyers) with ample financial resources (income of \$55,000/year for first-time buyers and \$86,000/year for repeat buyers) make up most of homebuyers in the United States¹⁰ and first-time buyers account for 40 percent of home purchases. Developers and builders assume that these young buyers will move to appropriate accommodations as their needs change. However, as buyers have a median occupancy of 25 years, the house will often have visitors and other residents over its lifetime. Also, accidents, diseases, and aging can reduce the mobility of persons who had no mobility impairments when they bought a house.¹¹ Thus, currently available single-family housing (designed for young buyers) may not meet present or future needs of residents as they age.¹²

In the U.S., approximately 6.8 percent of the non-institutionalized civilian population age five and older (or 19,670,844 people) have ambulatory challenges defined as¹³ “serious difficulty walking or climbing stairs.”¹⁴ Furthermore, 23.3 percent of the population 65 years old and older has such challenges.¹⁵ By 2024, the U.S. will add approximately 18 million people over the age of 65 with ambulatory difficulties.^{15,a} Even though 57 states and municipalities had adopted a visitability program² (33 mandatory and 24 voluntary)³ by 2008, the policies do not cover most privately-funded single family houses.²

Scholarly work on visitability remains sparse. Our review of the research found four categories of perceived obstacles to constructing new visitable housing units: physical, cognitive, aesthetic, and economic. However, much of the resistance to visitable designs stems from developer and builder perceptions that visitable features reduce the aesthetic quality of a house, increase its cost,¹⁶ and make it less affordable and harder to sell.² Yet people may value and pay more for visitable features.⁹ In addition, builders who lack experience with visitable houses overestimate the actual costs² which increase the price of new construction by up to one to two percent.^{5,11,17,18} Indeed, the cost of including visitable features in new construction projects is less than retrofitting a house to include them.¹ Advocates of visitability argue that it may expand the homebuyer market for a home in addition to enhancing safety, aesthetics, livability, long-term maintenance, and resale value.^{1,2,5}

Research questions

In an exploratory study, we sought to answer five questions related to the barriers that builders and developers perceive to including visitable features in new construction.

- Would homeowners and homebuyers assess houses with visitable features as more expensive?
- Would they assess such houses as more likely to house an older person or a person with difficulty walking?
- Would they prefer to buy a house with or without each visitable feature?
- Which kind of house, visitable or non-visitable, would they expect to sell faster?
- How would each visitable feature affect rated qualities of a house (such as good design, aesthetics, appeal to young, appeal to old, ease of hosting visitors, and resale value) that might relate to its marketability?

Method

Sample

We surveyed 96 homeowners (31 men, 65 women) and 107 (25 men, 80 women, 2 no response) homebuyers throughout the state of Ohio. Each sample was large enough to capture respondents throughout the state and powerful enough for the planned comparisons. Levin's¹⁹ formulas for planned comparisons indicated that we needed a sample of 22 or more. The recruitment and surveys took place May 20–June 20, 2014, for homeowners and August 7–September 2, 2014, for homebuyers. Respondents came from 134 zip codes in Ohio and were diverse in socio-demographic characteristics (Table 1).

To recruit respondents, we used Qualtrics for the homeowner sample and Research Match for the homebuyer sample. Qualtrics drew a sample from an actively managed market research panel, built on a national level to represent the U.S. population as a whole. To create the panel, Qualtrics recruited people by email, social media, and other online methods. From that national panel, Qualtrics targeted and invited 27,000 Ohio residents for the survey. Of the 399 who completed the survey, 96 completed the full survey and indicated that they were Ohio homeowners. Research Match maintains a list of individuals who volunteer to participate in studies. From the 8296 volunteers in Ohio, we contacted 6278 between the ages of 25 and 65 with a recruitment message which briefly described the survey and indicated that the study was looking for input from Ohio residents who planned to buy a house. Those who responded received an e-mail checking if they planned to buy a house in the next twelve months. If they had such plans, they received the URL for the survey. 223 received the URL, and, 107 completed the full survey.

^a In 2012, the U.S. had approximately 17.5 million people age 60 to 64, and 20 million people ages 55 to 59 (American Community Survey, 2012). If the percentages of people with ambulatory difficulties stays the same, then by 2019, the U.S. will add about 4 million residents with ambulatory difficulties, and by 2024, it will add more than 8 million additional residents with ambulatory difficulties. Taking into account people moving away or dying, by 2024, that number will increase to about 18 million.

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