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Taking another step toward accessibility

By Jane Adler
Special to the Tribune

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Everyone wants a house where friends and relatives feel welcome, so no one wants a place where visitors can't even get in the door.

That's the premise behind an effort to improve home access. The so-called "visitability" movement seeks to have builders and architects include a few simple features in their designs so an elderly or disabled person can easily visit. The features are wide doorways, a first-floor bathroom, and at least one entrance without a step.

Of course, many of the ranch homes designed for older adults have these features, along with the first-floor master suite. But the visitability push is gaining steam in homes meant for the general population--a good thing for grandparents.

Cities and towns are enacting laws that require builders to include visitable features in their homes.

As of June 2006, 44 states and towns had a visitability program, according to just-published research by Jordana L. Maisel, director of outreach and policy studies at the Center for Inclusive Design and Environmental Access at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"The idea has taken off across the country," she said.

The southwestern suburb of Bolingbrook was one of the first towns in the nation to pass a law that requires all new single-family homes to be visitable.

Chicago passed an ordinance in 2003 that mandates that certain types of developments have a percentage of visitable units. Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.) plans to reintroduce legislation this year that would mandate visitability in federally financed housing.

Chicago builder Paul Bertsche decided to make two-thirds of the homes visitable at one of his projects, the Residences of Old Irving Park, 4500 W. Irving Park Rd.

The project has 26 visitable single-family homes, though the law required him to build just four.

Thirteen of the town homes in the development are visitable and two are adaptable, which means they can fairly easily be made wheelchair ready.

"We've embraced the visitable concept," said Bertsche, vice president and general counsel at C.A. Development Inc., which has two other projects with visitable homes. "It makes a larger pool of housing available to all types of people."

Bertsche didn't want the houses to look as if the visitable features were an afterthought--something stuck into the plan at the last minute to meet the building code.

"We wanted to make this an attractive feature to the home," he said.

In the design, the visitable no-step entry was put at the back of the house. The entry leads to a great room and kitchen area that includes a bathroom.

A cathedral ceiling gives the space, according to Bertsche, "a real feeling of grace."

The living area is attached to a garage, also with a no-step entry. A formal living room and dining area are about five steps up from the family room and kitchen.

Chicago architect Steven Ryniewicz designed some of Bertsche's visitable homes. He said the zero-step entrance was in the back because he felt the visitable part of the house should be the active area, the kitchen and family rooms, where people naturally gather.

"We're taking away barriers that would come between people who want to get together," said Ryniewicz, partner at FitzGerald Associates Architects. "It helps create a sense of community."

Architect Janet Olson also designed houses for builder Bertsche, but she put the no-step entry at the front of the house so visitors step across the threshold and into the family room. A full bath and the entrance to the garage at the back of the home is on the same level.

"The idea was to design a house that felt like a normal house," said Olson, at Guajardo REC Architects, Chicago. "We made no concessions."

How do buyers react?

Bertsche said he doesn't present the visitability features to prospective residents as a city requirement. Instead, he tells them about the benefits of the design.

And, he adds, when people see the expansive and welcoming nature of the space, they usually don't select the house because they think they might get old and need easy access.

They pick the home because they like it.

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