



SENIORS FOR SOCIAL ACTION (ONTARIO)

Editorial – January 16, 2023

THE NEED FOR A UNIVERSAL DESIGN STANDARD IN CANADA'S BUILDING CODE

Will Canada adopt the Universal Design Standard?

Australia's Building Code Board has recently adopted a "livable housing design standard (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017; National Construction Code, 2022). New houses and apartments will now be accessible for all, including seniors and persons with disabilities, because livable or universal design is no longer merely a recommendation. It is a requirement.

Canada is far behind in this respect. Its national building code *omits* housing from accessibility considerations or defers it to the municipalities. The draft [Accessibility Canada Standard](#) (Government of Canada, 2022; CMHC, 2023), currently under review, *excludes* housing altogether for similar reasons, and the Accessible Housing Network (AHN) has proposed an amendment to include it in all of its forms.

Even though the federal government is transferring over \$72B to the provinces and territories over a decade, it still fails to provide strong leadership since the [National Housing Strategy](#) (CMHC, 2022) requires only 20% accessibility (typically found in multi-units rather than other forms of housing). Thus in effect it allows for 80% of housing to be inaccessible! It fails, therefore, to meet the global [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (United Nations, 2022) for cities and communities, and allows ableism to trump inclusion. Instead of removing barriers to accessibility, our housing strategy continues to contravene human rights laws and goes in the opposite direction of Australia. Why is Canada such a laggard?

Before answering this question, it should be noted that the oldest of [Canada's 9 million baby-boomers](#) will turn 80 in 2025 (StatsCan, 2022), and that most of them want to live at home as long as possible (March of Dimes Canada, 2021). If they fall or have a stroke, they want their houses to remain livable since they adamantly refuse to be warehoused in large nursing homes, away from family, friends, and community. They demand real alternatives to institutional eldercare.

Canada could be leading instead of following if only it dawned on builders and developers that house-rich-but-cash-poor boomers would gladly trade their homes for more accessible ones, if they could. When will it be realized that, in so doing, boomers would help grow the stock of accessible homes in Canada, and then pass them on to benefit posterity? Thanks to indoor plumbing, we no longer build outhouses, so why are we still building [costly](#), dated, unaffordable, and inaccessible housing? (Wiesel, 2020).

If we truly wish to secure the right to shelter in Canada, we need to meet several critical conditions: 1) we must promote affordable housing in Canada by building *all new homes* according to livable, universal design standard, like Australia; 2) we must provide grants (not just tax credits) to landlords and homeowners for renovating and retrofitting existing houses, condos and townhouses; 3) we must stop treating dwellings as investment vehicles rather than homes in order to protect renters from exorbitant increases and renovations; and finally, 4) we

must admit that an “Accessible Ontario” will never exist, never mind by 2025, as long as we discriminate against elders and people with disabilities in housing.

What will it take to get Canada to follow Australia’s lead, and for developers and builders to sell accessible homes to the millions of baby-boomers with equity? They can easily do this, and much more, by creating livable dwellings *for Canadians of all means, ages and abilities*. Starting today.

Salvatore Amenta is Co-Chair of the Accessible Housing Network (AHN) and founding member of Seniors for Social Action Ontario

REFERENCES

- CMHC. (2022). National Housing Strategy. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/nhs>
- CMHC. (2023). Accessible and adaptable housing. <https://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/professionals/industry-innovation-and-leadership/industry-expertise/accessible-adaptable-housing>
- Commonwealth of Australia. (2017). Livable housing design guidelines. https://livablehousingaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/SLLHA_GuidelinesJuly2017FINAL4.pdf
- Government of Canada. (2022). Draft: A model standard for the built environment – Accessibility. <https://accessible.canada.ca/draft-standard-built-environment-accessibility>
- March of Dimes Canada. (April 27, 2021). National survey shows Canadians overwhelmingly want to age at home; Just one quarter of seniors expect to do so. <https://www.newswire.ca/news-releases/national-survey-shows-canadians-overwhelmingly-want-to-age-at-home-just-one-quarter-of-seniors-expect-to-do-so-842023628.html>
- National Construction Code. (2022). Livable housing design. <https://ncc.abcb.gov.au/editions/ncc-2022/preview/volume-two/h-class-1-and-10-buildings/part-h8-livable-housing-design>
- StatsCan. (April 27, 2022). A generational portrait of Canada’s aging population from the 2022 census. <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/as-sa/98-200-X/2021003/98-200-X2021003-eng.cfm>
- United Nations. (2022). The Sustainable Development Goals Report. <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2022/>
- Wiesel, I. (October 22, 2020). Living with disability in inaccessible housing: social health and economic impacts. https://disability.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/3969109/Accessible-Housing-Research-Report-22-October-2020.pdf