

Real Life Renos Podcast

Ron Wickman

00:00:08:10 - 00:00:21:23

Ron Wickman

Welcome to the Real Life podcast, I'm your host, Karen Brown, and today we are welcoming Ron Wickman. Ron was born and raised in Edmonton, Alberta. He graduated from the Technical University of Nova Scotia with a master of architecture degree.

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Karen Brown

Like many in professional fields, Ron specializes, and his interest was very clear in his master's thesis, which was entitled Beyond the Ramp. It has since been published and is available through his website now. I ordered a copy of it and I was just so mesmerized by it.

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Karen Brown

I found it very thought-provoking because it not only identifies the problems, but it helps us understand the process that went into finding solutions. So welcome, Ron. It's good to have you.

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Ron Wickman

Well, thanks for having me.

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Karen Brown

Terrific. Can you tell us, before we jump into a lot of this, what led to your master's thesis? Because I know you've worked a lot in commercial buildings, residential buildings and community, but that spark that led you to develop that master's thesis, I'd like to know about that story.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, it actually goes, it goes all the way back to when I was born, basically, I was born in 1964 and at about about three months old

my dad was injured in a work related accident, and he ended up breaking his spine a spinal cord injury, and he used a wheelchair for his entire life

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Ron Wickman

from then on. And that's how I grew up. So I grew up in an environment where I had to navigate, to navigate the built environment just like he did from from a wheelchair. So as we went out to restaurants, movie theaters, bowling, we did a lot

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Ron Wickman

so he had to be strategic about the kinds of activities we could do. We didn't do a lot of hiking, for example. And so when we did go to restaurants, sometimes we just couldn't get in the front door.

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Ron Wickman

We had to go in through the back and see where the garbage was distributed and meet the dishwashers and meet the cooking staff and then we would actually meet the host or hostess who would who could seat us.

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Ron Wickman

So all of that seemed really wrong to me as I was, as I was growing up and it seemed like, why? Why is this even happening? And so at a very early age, the seed was planted for me that maybe the built environment could be altered so that we didn't have to change the way we navigated it

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Ron Wickman

and luckily for me, growing up to my dad was a strong advocate and later in his life, he became a politician, serving nine years for the city of Edmonton as a councillor and twelve years as an MLA in Alberta

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Ron Wickman

and and I realized that also politics was really not my calling. So I thought that being an architect would be a way to help improve the the built environment for people with disabilities. So very early on. In fact, when I was twelve, I decided that architecture would be a good, a good profession for me to take on

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Ron Wickman

and so if I knew what a thesis was when I was twelve years old, I had already written it, so I did everything I could from then on, to gain the necessary education and requirements to get into a school of architecture

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Ron Wickman

and I did end up going to the university, well Dalhousie now in in Halifax. The city of Edmonton, does not have a school of architecture, so I had to go somewhere and even when I graduated and ended up going on my own, I still didn't really appreciate the lack of understanding amongst my profession

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Ron Wickman

so I just thought I would be another architect on the block that would do good work, I felt, and maybe one of the bonuses of hiring me would be this lived experience I had with accessibility. But as time went on, I realized that there weren't very many people giving it much attention

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Ron Wickman

so since 1995, when I started my practice, I now pretty much that's all I do is do work related to people with disabilities, and I think you do end up becoming more like your parents as you age. So I've also become a strong advocate and I'm not running for politics, but

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Ron Wickman

I'm certainly much more politically active these days.

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Karen Brown

You talk in your book about public spaces a lot and so we'll bounce off your family's travels to downtown spaces and you certainly saw a lot of the problems. In your book

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Karen Brown

you talk about, you know, things like grand staircases and things that do need to be renovated and redesigned. How can that happen because so many of our buildings are so old?

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Ron Wickman

Sorry, how can they be renovated?

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Karen Brown

How can how can these grand staircases be renovated and still stay true to some sort of architectural beauty, which is important to so many people?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, and that's that's a that is a real challenge, and it's also a challenge going all the way back to our training as as architects

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Ron Wickman

so in school, there is a tradition really that goes back to the Greek and Roman times when buildings in port and buildings were built on platforms that you needed to get upstairs a few stairs, at least like the Parthenon in Greece

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Ron Wickman

and that meant the people standing on the stage so to speak were the important people so historically and culturally, we understand

stairs to, or at least this elevated space, to be important to us so in our, in our older cities and our older buildings, we see these these stairs, these grand stairs

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Ron Wickman

and yeah, it's a it's a real it's a real big problem and it's really hard to renovate. I actually had that, had to do that, exercise for our Legislature building here in Edmonton, and it became quite quite a task to try to figure out how to provide access for for MLAs, staff, visitors who use wheelchairs.

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Ron Wickman

So as it stands right now, you, you go into a side entrance, you have to call security to let you in. And certainly when my father became an MLA, the thought, the thought that the building needed to be more accessible for him became quite prominent and they did what they could.

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Ron Wickman

But they really never they they still have never really addressed that that issue of of their true dignity of that building and allowing people to enter well actually allow everybody to enter the same the same way. So I would say, generally speaking, the people who push to keep the historical side of the building have a stronger influence

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Ron Wickman

than, let's say, those of us that push for accessibility. So that's that's kind of an ongoing thing. Having said that in my time now as as an architect, I'm seeing a true cultural shift and the Legislature building in Winnipeg, for example, has a quite a beautiful ramp that leads to the front entrance

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Ron Wickman

and it was very well designed, and that was certainly an inspiration for me and in coming up with ideas of what we could do here in Edmonton. So it it, it is being done, it's being addressed, but it's always, always really hard to to make it work so that it looks like it maybe was there right from the beginning.

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Karen Brown

Right. You wrote in Chapter five of your book about your work with the Premier's Council on the Status of Persons with Disabilities in downtown Edmonton and I was really struck by the innovative design techniques that were there and I'm thinking of the handrails with the grooves and the cuts in the floor. Can you tell us a bit about those solutions, how you came to them and how they're employed?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. Well, first and foremost, I don't come up with these things all by myself.

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Ron Wickman

So I I look to people who truly can help me so in the case of the Premier's Council space, there were two staff who used wheelchairs. Now, for me, understanding the needs of somebody who might use a wheelchair is a little bit easier,

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Ron Wickman

I have to admit. I grew up with it. Where it gets harder are other disabilities and one of the staff members, Diane Bergeron, who works, who worked at the Premier's Council, she is blind and she, I basically I call her my blind muse, so I go to her for all of my needs

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Ron Wickman

I guess as, as, as I need to address designing space for people who are blind or have low vision. In Diane's case, she she has no

ability to see light or shadow, so she completely relies on on sounds, smells and texture to help her navigate the environment.

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Ron Wickman

So in working on that space, one thing we did, for example, is I used a fabric paint which creates a texture, and I I put that paint on all the lines of the floor plan of my drawing so she could feel with her fingers

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Ron Wickman

the floor plan. So she really understood the space as we were designing it and and again, like I said, we we used the the color and texture contrast squares in in the flooring at points where one would have to make a decision to turn or to stop.

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Ron Wickman

And so that it's it's not necessarily intuitive, it's it it's not telling you exactly what's there, but once you get used to using the space, then it becomes easier. But that texture will will definitely tell you that something's up and you need to make a decision.

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Ron Wickman

And same with the grooves in the handrail. The handrails are there to help people with stability issues, but also as a wayfinding device, we use the grooves at entrances to the various office spaces. So once you hit the groove, then you knew

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Ron Wickman

then you can, you know, you could turn 90 degrees and that would be the entry into that office space. So I really did use Diane, especially to help me design that space.

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Karen Brown

The grooves in the handrails are really very pretty. I mean, it is part of the architectural look of the place, but they serve such an important purpose.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, I love that part, too, because again, I think what a lot of other designers think, whether you're an architect, interior designer, industrial designer, is that these these elements have to be purely functional and there's no attempt to make

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Ron Wickman

them look beautiful or make them look seamless or invisible. And that's a big part of my book as well where where I do talk about making it again look like it was always meant to be there, but actually taking advantage of the fact that it needs to be there for a functional purpose, but make it look quite beautiful as well.

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Karen Brown

Terrific. COVID has had such a huge impact on the way that we work and where we work, a lot more people working from home. A lot of empty commercial buildings in downtown areas. Is this an opportunity to bring COVID or sorry to bring accessibility into the discussion in a more robust way?

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Ron Wickman

Absolutely, yeah, it's really. And again, this part of it is it has nothing to do with architecture or design, it's just the fact that we do have the means and technology to allow somebody, and we know this well,

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Ron Wickman

we can work at home and we can work with our computers and we can connect with other people all over the world. Now, for me, I started my practice in 95 working out of my home and I haven't changed, so I was ready for for that part of COVID

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Ron Wickman

right from the beginning. But I know a lot of people who have disabilities have told me that they were, they would have trouble finding work simply because the facility wasn't accessible, and it would cost a lot to upgrade the facility.

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Ron Wickman

And I think again, sometimes some people think that maybe somebody in a wheelchair or somebody who's blind doesn't have the same abilities to to to do these things so for sure that part of it's been demonstrated that we can we can definitely work remotely.

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Ron Wickman

And and and now we're starting to see the change in office space, certainly from a design perspective. The need to keep people a certain distance apart from each other allows for wider spaces between desks, hallway spaces, that sort of thing.

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Ron Wickman

So that's that certainly would make navigating from a wheelchair, let's say, in an office space a lot easier. But it really has raised people's awareness of of what what people with disabilities who really are just people, what they can do.

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Ron Wickman

So just because you're in a wheelchair doesn't mean it has any effect on your your brain capacity. So it's just I think it takes those people that don't understand that to to truly understand that part of it.

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Karen Brown

Right. I'm going to quote from your book. Most designers and builders attempt to meet the requirements of the building code without understanding their intent, making it easy to see why true accessibility is not achieved. So how much time do architectural and design students spend during their educational phase actually learning about accessibility?

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Ron Wickman

Very, very little. Very little. There are. There are really no classes that one would take. It's not really part of our design studios. So when we're designing a building, it's rarely brought up well in my experience was never brought up from professors.

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Ron Wickman

Of course, it was brought up because I brought it up as a student. So when it and when it is discussed, it's discussed as, well there's the building code, so unfortunately, in schools of architecture, I think the the attitude is that you have the rest of your life after school to learn all about barrier free design and

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Ron Wickman

accessibility, and the code will tell you that and that's kind of like, you know, I hate to say this, but that's kind of like the boring stuff so, you know, don't worry about that now you're in school, have fun, you know, do things that are edgy and thinking outside the box.

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Ron Wickman

But here I was in school going, well, I am thinking outside the box. I'm trying to design a building that is super accessible for as many people as possible and yes, I want to make my buildings beautiful and I want to have lots of natural light and I want to use beautiful materials and create great spatial experiences

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Ron Wickman

but if you if you design it so that a lot of people can't experience it because you have steps or other issues, then you're really not fulfilling your your role as the architect and designer.

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Karen Brown

Right. In your book, there is one point in Chapter four, there are twelve pages that outline the needs of persons with a variety

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Karen Brown

of disabilities, ranging from hearing to sight to mobility. It's really very intimidating not to provide an excuse for this not to be done but it is a very intimidating path to follow. Do students in architecture ever hear the term visitability?

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Ron Wickman

So visitability is is a concept that relates mostly to single family homes. And essentially, it would allow somebody, a friend, a family member, to come and visit for a short period of time to your house. So what

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Ron Wickman

what you need for that to be able to happen is you need a no step entrance. Hopefully, it's the primary entrance, but it doesn't have to be. It has to be one of the exterior doors and then that that door needs to be wide enough, typically three feet wide, to be able to get through.

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Ron Wickman

And there needs to be a pathway at least three feet wide that would lead to a bathroom that somebody, let's say, in a wheelchair could actually use. So three elements the no step entrance, the door and hallway wide enough and the bathroom.

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Ron Wickman

So that allows somebody to come and visit and have a couple of cups of coffee and know that they they they can still use the bathroom. And interestingly enough, I know that the term visibility was coined in the eighties, so I had been living it without knowing what it was.

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Ron Wickman

So my my growing up with my father, friends and family would always visit us because it was just easier for my dad to have people at his house because he could easily get in, of course, and he had a bathroom that he could use,

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Ron Wickman

whereas if we went to a friend's house, usually that meant me helping my dad up the stairs and in winter conditions, that was never safe. And and then he could only stay for a short period of time because if he had a, you know, three cups of coffee, let's say, then they typically wouldn't have had a washroom

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Ron Wickman

that he could use. And you know, the worst case scenario would be that he would go down the hallway and literally pee in a cup and then have to pass it to somebody to pour down the toilet. So, you know, that's not the kind of way you want to have things work.

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Ron Wickman

So visibility is very easy to do. But still, again, it gets back to that sort of cultural understanding. It's really hard to promote because part of it is people just don't understand what it is, and part of it is people think it might not work right for them or they don't need it.

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Ron Wickman

So they'll they'll get it when they absolutely need it, which is typically too late.

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Karen Brown

Why do we still build houses with two or three steps? Because in other countries, that's more rare than it is common. But for us, it seems to be what we have to do while we're still doing that.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, well, two things. Well, actually, many things, but one is the one major thing is, is our our environment. So so we do have winter here. So we we do have a frost line that we have to build below.

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Ron Wickman

And we have lots of moisture issues and we we build with wood. So, you know, those two things kind of have created a situation where we want to get our floors above the ground level so that our wood floors are not touching the ground and getting wet and then rotting and that sort of thing.

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Ron Wickman

So traditionally we've we've built homes to have at least about a foot, eight inches to a foot, of concrete before there's the wood floor and the wood floor joists. And initially, we would have just dug down as deep as we needed to to have the foundation not move with our freeze thaw cycles.

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Ron Wickman

But somewhere along the line, somebody said, well, we just dig a little bit further than you can have all this like if you have 1000 square feet on the main floor, you get another thousand square feet underground, which is the basement

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Ron Wickman

and so then the basement became quite desirable. And, and then there were, for a time there was, a desire to have that basement

windows as big as possible, so then you got into these houses that are terrible for accessibility bi-level, so you enter at grade and then you go up six or seven steps or down six or

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Ron Wickman

seven steps. So usually when I see a house like that, I'm like, OK, it's this one, this one's like, without even entering the house, I know it's going to be hard to to renovate. So accessibility has never been a priority, and visitability certainly hasn't been a priority for for the from the public demanding it from the builders

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Ron Wickman

and the builders aren't inclined to build it without that demand being there, so it's it's a bit of a double edged sword.

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Karen Brown

Right. I find that the more I talked to contractors and builders as well as homeowners, nobody knows what to ask for.

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Karen Brown

Nobody knows standard terminology. It's just this vast area of really not understanding. Somebody says they want a shower. They get a shower that is, you know, a certain size with a lip to step over. There's not really the default of not having a lip in the shower.

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Karen Brown

There's not a default of having a strapless entry anywhere, and nobody really understands that builders struggle with it. They fight back against it all the time. So it's as much about educating homeowners to ask for it, isn't it, as builders to do it?

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Ron Wickman

Absolutely. Yeah, and I, throughout the years, I've kind of flip flopped as to who I blame. I should and shouldn't necessarily put it that way. But you know, like sometimes I'm kind of mad at the builders because I think I'll just build it right and they'll buy it from you.

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Ron Wickman

But you know, I know that builders, especially on with spec housing, they don't make money unless they can sell it, so they're not inclined to spend any extra money, even if it's not much at all if they don't see any kind of return for that.

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Ron Wickman

So, yeah, I don't blame them for not building things that they're not getting asked to do. But then at the same time, the public doesn't know what to ask for. So, you know, I know a lot of people who have said, Oh, my builder told me I can't have no step entrance.

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Ron Wickman

It doesn't meet the building code. So, you know, that's just wrong. But maybe the builder's sincere and really thinks that, but it's just not true, right? So it really does it, it what I'm, what I've been thinking a lot about lately is, is that we we kind of need a critical mass of people that do understand the

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Ron Wickman

issues. So from all ends, so we need we need a good number of people out there in the public that can speak confidently about accessibility issues like visitability. We need a good number of builders that are familiar and know how to do it quite easily.

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Ron Wickman

We need the media, people in media to be able to talk about it more with confidence and have more articles in, well I'm dating myself, articles and papers. I guess our articles where however we

find them, social media and and we need it to be on the radar of our politicians, and that's really a big problem.

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Ron Wickman

I know, I know here in Edmonton it's been a struggle to get our city council to really, really, really buy into this. So yes, still, they say this isn't this is an important issue. We want to have our built environment to be accessible for all our citizens.

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Ron Wickman

They say that and and when they have control of their own buildings, like the libraries and the rec centers, they actually do a really good job. But housing is just not regulated by really by municipalities, so they really have no control of the situation.

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Ron Wickman

They rely on the the the market to to really dictate all of that.

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Karen Brown

Right. I know one a small town that I have an apartment in, the council, I have asked the council members why they don't impose this.

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Karen Brown

Why can't you? When somebody comes to you with a proposal for a development, why can't you say that one unit or two unit or 10% have to be built entirely accessible? And their fear, as expressed by this particular member of council anyway, was that if they start imposing conditions on things, the builders will just throw up their

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Karen Brown

hands and go to another town, which loses them tax base. So it's, you know, it's it is definitely a layered issue.

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Ron Wickman

Yes.

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Karen Brown

We touched on ...

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Ron Wickman

No, you're absolutely right, yeah, yeah.

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Karen Brown

Go ahead.

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Ron Wickman

No, no. I'm just saying you're absolutely right, and I hear that a lot here as well.

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Karen Brown

Right. We touched on bathrooms and an expression that I do hear coming up more and more frequently, which is a good thing is wet room. Can you explain what that is and how that is of benefit to an accessible, needed needs community?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. The wet room in essences is a bathroom that's waterproofed completely so the entire floor. All the walls. The ceiling. Everything's just waterproof. And again, you you mentioned about how we build with stairs. And I, you know, we build with wood, mostly especially our housing.

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Ron Wickman

So traditionally we haven't we haven't embraced the idea of the wet room in a bathroom that's literally framed in wood. We're

afraid that water will seep through and and and rot the wood. In Europe and in Asia construction is usually done with concrete, concrete block.

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Ron Wickman

So the wet room is not is not a weird or unusual thing in most of Europe and Asia It just is here. So it's it's taken a long time to become something that's talked about more but now there are systems out there that completely waterproof your your bathroom and and it's really becoming a big deal.

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Ron Wickman

In fact, I was in St Louis at a universal design conference about five years ago, and they had a little kind of trade show. So it was just a small it wasn't a big trade show, it was a small room.

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Ron Wickman

There were maybe twelve booths and four of them were shower, shower systems so there were four competitors trying to convince me that their wet room product was the best out there. So that really told me that there's a real market for this and and you're just seeing it more and more.

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Ron Wickman

And of course, in the United States, just the sheer population may be somewhere around 70 million people are over the age of 65 in the United States so that's a big market, and so they're they're they're seeing that people, people as they're aging, really like this idea because it it absolutely looks gorgeous and it looks like anything you

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Ron Wickman

can imagine. Any kind of washroom that you want, any tile you want, your your fixtures, your plumbing fixtures, your lighting, everything is is exactly the same as you could imagine. The only

difference, maybe, is that there's no curb at the shower itself, right?

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Ron Wickman

So I don't think anybody would notice that. So I know for myself, I've I've had real trouble convincing clients that, you know, the wet room is just it's just a beautiful room and and you know, you'll love it.

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Ron Wickman

So that happens every single time that we end up finishing the bathroom. My clients love their bathrooms or wet rooms, but there's that initial resistance that certainly is there because they don't see enough. They haven't seen enough examples to, you know, feel confident that that theirs is going to look really good.

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Karen Brown

Right. And you know, that speaks to all of our communities. I mean, pick one, it doesn't matter whether it's rural or urban, none of them are really great places to grow old in because of the way that building has happened over the decades and decades.

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Karen Brown

So how do we come back from that? How do we make this place as good to live in because they sure as heck aren't building more long term care facilities? Yeah, a couple more decades that population will fall off, so they don't want to do that either.

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Ron Wickman

I think I think it's taken, you know, hundreds of years to get us to this point. So, you know, hopefully it doesn't take us long to get us out of it. But I think the big key in all of this is when we think about the wet room, for example,

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Ron Wickman

I think the big key is to not just promote it to, and the concept of visitability as well, not just to promote it to people who are aging or people with disabilities but it really is for everybody. Like who wouldn't want a wet room, even if you're a young couple.

00:31:29:24 - 00:31:46:33

Ron Wickman

It's a it's a just a it's a great room. It's easy to maintain. It's easy to keep clean. You're a young couple, maybe with a small child, and you don't have time to to spend cleaning baths. Rooms all the time, so this wet room is just it's so easy to to keep up.

00:31:47:29 - 00:32:11:17

Ron Wickman

So people are going. People with dogs, they can just, you know, hose down their dog in the shower area. Like it just, there's just so many advantages and when when more of our population starts to see the advantages for themselves and not just for maybe our more frail population people who in that, you know, elderly or people

00:32:11:17 - 00:32:31:17

Ron Wickman

with disabilities, then then it'll start to really change right? And visibility is just like that no step entrance. I could give you so many examples of my own house, like we sold our couch and the guy that came to pick it up, you know, he just walked into the house, didn't think much of it.

00:32:33:05 - 00:32:44:33

Ron Wickman

And then he grabbed the end of the couch and started backing up. I grabbed the other end and he started, he started backing out of the door, and then after a few steps, he started kind of reaching his foot back for the step.

00:32:45:36 - 00:32:56:09

Ron Wickman

He didn't realize when he entered my house that there were no steps. So he's going wait a minute, wait a minute, there's no steps here. And I said, yeah, you're like, you didn't notice when you walked in. He goes, no, I didn't.

00:32:56:09 - 00:33:08:47

Ron Wickman

I didn't even notice, he goes, but this is awesome. Like, I can't believe this. Like, I'm not going to fall backwards. And you know, anybody that's delivered a big piece of furniture or an appliance like a washer, whatever to our house, they just love it, right?

00:33:09:14 - 00:33:23:38

Ron Wickman

And I have two little grandchildren now and and my son and daughter-in-law, they they don't have a, you know, two little dinky strollers. They have this big, you know, double stroller thing that is like a, you know, a small vehicle.

00:33:24:00 - 00:33:39:48

Ron Wickman

So they they appreciate just being able to wheel right up to the door and even in their own house, they've been there. Of course, they know who their dad is and they're going, well, you know, we we really could use a ramp at our house because I just don't like the idea of this.

00:33:39:48 - 00:33:59:09

Ron Wickman

Like, you know, carrying one kid and pushing another kid and like and dealing with the steps, especially in the winter time, I'm afraid I'm going to fall and so, you know, just just the way that we build and then we force ourselves to adapt to the conditions where we which we have the ability and knowledge to

00:33:59:09 - 00:34:10:55

Ron Wickman

just build it so much better, right? It just it is kind of a weird thing when you think about it, but we're again, we're just so entrenched

in doing it a certain way that we just get used to adapting right now.

00:34:11:13 - 00:34:24:05

Ron Wickman

My dad is somebody who used a wheelchair was like that, like he just adapted to whatever he had to because he had no choice, right? Now we have more choice, so people are finding it a little bit easier.

00:34:24:05 - 00:34:28:06

Ron Wickman

But still you run into these these problems.

00:34:28:06 - 00:34:41:03

Karen Brown

Right. I was really struck in your book by one particular picture. It was a picture of a person in a wheelchair traveling down this endless sidewalk. Like the sidewalk just didn't end.

00:34:41:17 - 00:34:53:40

Karen Brown

It looked so boring. There was no shade. There was no place to sit down. Now I know the person in a wheelchair is in a seat. But for somebody who would have been walking with a cane or somebody walking with small children, there was no place to rest.

00:34:53:42 - 00:35:14:44

Karen Brown

It was just this endless, boring journey. And that is how we are tending to build these communities these days. There's so spread out. Let me quote from your book again. Communities should be planned so that we are not forced to travel by automobile from our dwellings to our workplaces, shopping and for entertainment. For those people who do

00:35:14:44 - 00:35:27:06

Karen Brown

not or cannot drive. The advantages of such planning principles are obvious. Those who do not drive retain the choice. Being able

to get to a workplace, to a store, to a restaurant or to a park without use of a vehicle is a privilege

00:35:27:25 - 00:35:39:00

Karen Brown

few people who live in the suburbs are given. Talk to me a little bit about how a community would be built in a perfect world and who were building it for.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. So I mean, you've really struck on the heart of of my thesis and then the book as well, so that hence the title Beyond the Ramp,

00:35:47:24 - 00:36:09:38

Ron Wickman

right? So my thesis did more from, you know, thinking about a building that would be accessible to the way we design communities. And so part of my research was to look at communities that would be better to live in if you were somebody with a disability

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Ron Wickman

and what would be not as good? And so definitely my experience here in Edmonton is the suburbs are not friendly for people with disabilities, especially those that don't drive and the inner city communities, the older neighborhoods, are the ones that at least have the bones and the infrastructure, meaning the the the different uses within the community that

00:36:41:26 - 00:37:04:36

Ron Wickman

then people could live close to where they shop, work, play. So, so not always are the pathways necessarily accessible in inner city communities, but those are sort of the easier things to deal with. It's like a house. You have to have the house itself to have all the right functions and the kind of right space to make

00:37:04:36 - 00:37:20:58

Ron Wickman

it work. And then if you need to widen the hallway, sure, you can make it. You know, if you need to deal with a little step, you can deal. Those are things you can deal with quite easily. So I started to really look at that, that that idea of how could we design a community that would allow

00:37:20:58 - 00:37:38:46

Ron Wickman

people to to live in quite easily? Again, especially if you don't drive. And what I found is that here in Edmonton, we have a community, Old Strathcona, which you know, has a primary street with shopping on it. People love to shop along on that street

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Ron Wickman

and and housing is nearby with a mixture of affordable and sometimes not so affordable housing. So it's really a good situation for everybody. And then what you find is that so many people can take advantage of that. So lots of lots of problems with the suburbs has has been with even relating to obesity and this kind of

00:38:08:51 - 00:38:27:57

Ron Wickman

disconnect between people now. So this whole idea of having a community that could really bring people together and and allow people to access so many more things was was something that that became very important to me and what needed to happen in Edmonton

00:38:27:58 - 00:38:47:26

Ron Wickman

I realize now, so many years later, is we needed that critical mass of people living in the city when finally the city and the city planners decided, yeah, we got to do something about this, so here in Alberta, with Edmonton and Calgary reaching over 1,000,000 people.

00:38:48:45 - 00:39:07:08

Ron Wickman

We're at a state now where we we realize it's expensive to keep spreading out. So infill housing infill development has become quite popular and has talked a lot about and done quite a bit now in both cities and places like Toronto and Montreal

00:39:07:09 - 00:39:20:33

Ron Wickman

they've been they've been way ahead of us just because they were out 1,000,000 people a long time before us. So we're, you know, we're just getting to that point and we're going through some of the growing pains of that, that infill housing.

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Ron Wickman

Initially, a lot of this infill not being has not been super affordable. And again what I'm finding is what's getting lost in the discussion is that we're not talking about infill development that is appropriate and better for people who are aging, people with disabilities

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Ron Wickman

so that's why I've been a little bit more politically active, I guess, as an advocate.

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Karen Brown

Right. For our listeners who may not know, can you describe just briefly what a definition is of infill housing?

00:39:57:43 - 00:39:58:49

Ron Wickman

Oh, sorry. Yeah. Yeah.

00:39:58:53 - 00:40:19:16

Ron Wickman

So infill housing would be housing in older neighborhoods. A good way to think about it here, I guess, is older communities that have back alleys, lanes, would be considered an inner inner city portion of that of the city.

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Ron Wickman

So infill is taking an old house that was built 50 years ago or so and tearing that house down and then building.

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Karen Brown

Your book features a very happy picture of you and one of your grandchildren. But you now have two.

00:40:34:23 - 00:40:41:41

Karen Brown

You must dream about the kinds of buildings they will live in and work in in the future.

00:40:41:41 - 00:40:57:20

Ron Wickman

Yes, I do. Yeah, and and first of all, this is not this isn't something I would want to or must happen for me, but what I would really like is for one of them to become an architect.

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Karen Brown

Of course.

00:40:58:47 - 00:41:14:03

Ron Wickman

So that would be very exciting for me, but that's that's up to them. But yeah, I do. I mean, even as I've been working as an architect with my three kids growing up, I kept thinking about their future too, right?

00:41:14:03 - 00:41:33:06

Ron Wickman

And and and again, I got to live it. I got to live that experience of how my dad related and experienced life with them. So they started to see that, Pops was my my dad's name for the kids,

00:41:33:48 - 00:41:51:14

Ron Wickman

so they got to see that Pops didn't always get to do things like everybody else, right? So for them to at an early age, they started to realize that sometimes the world's not always that fair and and I think they're much more compassionate children themselves

00:41:51:15 - 00:42:04:31

Ron Wickman

and so they'll be, you know, tremendous parents themselves, too. And and so it just has a way of kind of, you know, again, I talked about how it took us a long time to get here, so it'll take us some time to get out of it.

00:42:04:49 - 00:42:25:13

Ron Wickman

But that's how we can get out of it, is to just keep educating the next generation to to experience that life. Right. So I was just mentioning to somebody the other day that there was a time when I was young that people would actually, I know it's hard to believe, but people would actually cross the street

00:42:26:53 - 00:42:40:16

Ron Wickman

when I was walking with my dad wheeling beside me, like in the seventies, like people were actually so nervous about my dad that they would cross. I'm very serious and they would cross the street because they just didn't want to be near him

00:42:41:01 - 00:42:56:24

Ron Wickman

and and I just I found that so curious. I didn't understand as a small child, like, what? Why would you? My dad's really cool. Like, you'd love him. And and they're like, I don't know if they felt like they just didn't want to talk to him because they'd feel like uncomfortable.

00:42:56:25 - 00:43:15:33

Ron Wickman

But, you know, at restaurants, people would would ask me what my dad wanted, you know, like, what does he want? I don't know. I can't read his mind. And still, you know, so like, that's that's

something that that our current, you know, young people wouldn't really appreciate or understand because they couldn't imagine that there was ever a

00:43:15:33 - 00:43:31:05

Ron Wickman

time like that, right? But you know, there was right. So now, you know, now there's different issues. But so so yeah, I do very much, I'm very much influenced and guided by this idea of what the future could look like.

00:43:31:34 - 00:43:45:11

Ron Wickman

And I, you know, I love walking in my neighborhood. I live in a mature neighborhood and saying hi to my neighbors, and I just picked up my mail yesterday and a little boy just said, oh, you're picking up your mail.

00:43:45:11 - 00:43:55:01

Ron Wickman

And I'm like, yeah. He had like an insurance envelope that he was opening up and just this little boy, he's six years old, I found out. I said, well, you don't need a car insurance. You don't drive.

00:43:55:05 - 00:44:09:15

Ron Wickman

He goes, No silly. I'm six. I don't drive and and and I'm thinking, you know, here I am. Like, if the parent probably saw me from a distance, they might think I'm sort of creepy or something, right? So I'm like, I'm just having a great little chat with this kid, you know?

00:44:09:15 - 00:44:22:54

Ron Wickman

But that's not that kind of encounter just made my day. I just I thought, Well, this is a great thing, right? And so that's the kind of atmosphere, I guess, in communities that I want to try to trade.

00:44:22:54 - 00:44:38:30

Ron Wickman

And I don't want people to be other people to be afraid of anybody with any kind of disability. And you know, I think people who use wheelchairs, I don't think there's that, you know, that same kind of fear factor anymore.

00:44:39:22 - 00:45:02:08

Ron Wickman

I would say today, probably people are just starting to appreciate and understand some of the issues around mental health and people with cognitive disabilities. And so that's, you know, that's something that's challenging for people, I think people with, you know, with,

00:45:02:16 - 00:45:20:26

Ron Wickman

quite major disabilities, but we're starting to see that that people are people and they just they have different, they have different means of getting around. And and that's the kind of that's the kind of world that we just appreciate everybody for who they are, right?

00:45:20:26 - 00:45:29:48

Ron Wickman

And that's that's the kind of atmosphere that I'd like to create for always tried to create for my kids and certainly hopefully for my grandkids as well.

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Karen Brown

Right. And those kinds of communities that you're talking about will build that kind of engagement. Slow to happen.

00:45:35:35 - 00:45:37:58

Ron Wickman

Yeah, I think so. Yeah, yeah.

00:45:37:58 - 00:45:49:41

Ron Wickman

That's a positive note to end our podcast on. So we're going to leave it there. But for anybody who's listening, Ron has two books, one of them called Beyond the Ramp, which is his master's thesis.

00:45:49:54 - 00:45:55:52

Karen Brown

The second one is called Accessible Architecture, A Visit From Pops. And this is your father, right?

00:45:55:52 - 00:46:09:07

Ron Wickman

Yeah. So that the first book was it's basically a children's book which really tells the story of a, very quickly here, tells a story of how we modified our own bungalow to actually make it a two story.

00:46:09:08 - 00:46:33:11

Ron Wickman

And then we we repoured our front car garage, driveway and sidewalks so that there was no longer three steps at the front door. So. So this idea that my dad, before our renovation would literally park his van on our driveway and phone into the house and the kids would come running out and grab their treats from him

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Ron Wickman

and then go running back in. And that was the extent of his visit. And and then he was after the renovation and he was able to just wheel up to the house and just like, literally come right into the house and visit with us and stay for a bit.

00:46:50:32 - 00:47:03:26

Ron Wickman

And not only was that great for him and the kids, but my dad and I were very, very close, so it also made great sense and it was very nice for for him to be able to stay and we could catch up on things and

00:47:03:56 - 00:47:17:25

Ron Wickman

and so you know that that children's book I hope to, you know, be read to young children again and they would start asking their

parents, Well, yeah, how come you know, how come our our grandpa and grandma can't come to our house, right?

00:47:17:26 - 00:47:23:01

Ron Wickman

Like, how can we don't? Why do we have steps, right? So at least get that that in the conversation?

00:47:23:01 - 00:47:31:19

Karen Brown

You know, I think this is something we learned back a few years ago, a couple of decades ago, I guess when we were doing recycling, we started with recycling.

00:47:32:08 - 00:47:41:11

Karen Brown

There was a very conscious effort to teach it to the children in school because then they would go home and educate their parents. So that's exactly the philosophy that you were talking about.

00:47:41:11 - 00:47:43:12

Ron Wickman

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah.

00:47:43:12 - 00:47:44:49

Karen Brown

Well, thank you very much for joining us.

00:47:44:51 - 00:47:45:23

Ron Wickman

Oh, you're welcome.

00:47:45:23 - 00:47:54:36

Karen Brown

I think we've learned a lot. I hope everybody else has as well. And again, we will put all of the links to your books and your website on our show notes.

00:47:54:36 - 00:47:55:53

Ron Wickman
Great. Thanks so much.

00:47:55:53 - 00:47:56:33
Karen Brown
Thank you.

00:47:56:56 - 00:48:08:52
Karen Brown
And thank you to our listeners for joining us and I do hope that you will tune in again for another edition of the Real Life Renos podcast and until then, thanks again.

00:48:08:52 - 00:48:13:42
Karen Brown
Real Life Renos,, the podcast, is a production of Reno Studios, executive produced by Karen Brown.

00:48:14:05 - 00:48:24:14
Karen Brown
This Is Real Life theme music and lyrics by Jane Carmichael, recorded at Swamp Songs Recording Studio in Lucan, Ontario. Engineered by Matt Weston. Thank you for tuning in.