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Karen Brown

Welcome to Real Life Renos the podcast. Today we have with us again Ron Wickman, an architect who specializes in accessibility in residential commercial and public spaces. Today, we're going to dive a little deeper and while today's subject matter may sound like it's geared toward builders, municipal and county planners and municipal councillors, and it is, Ron and I both agree that more the more homeowners know about the mechanics of achieving accessibility, the better off they'll all be in terms of understanding the questions to ask when they're considering a new build and being able to assess their own ability to make modifications to existing homes. Welcome, Ron.

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Ron Wickman

Hi. Thanks for having me.

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Karen Brown

My pleasure. My pleasure. So in our last podcast, we touched on a term visitability and you did explain what it was, but for those who maybe haven't heard our first podcast could you explain that again?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. visitability is is an accessibility term. It's it's kind of what we call the low hanging fruit or the the easiest type of accessibility to achieve.

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Ron Wickman

And it essentially is designed to allow people with mobility difficulties to to at least enter your home and visit and stay for a little bit. So that means the entrance has to be accessible by wheelchair. No steps at the at the door. Typically, we'd like to see that that door being the main entry door, but in some cases, it could be a side door or a back door.

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Ron Wickman

Secondly, the the doorway to get through and and any kind of hallway space is needed to be wide enough for somebody in a wheelchair to maneuver around. So in today's context, almost all residential homes have three foot wide doors at the at the main entrance so that's not a problem. And hallways typically are wide enough as well. So, again, not too much of a problem there.

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Ron Wickman

And then the third concept with visitability would be to make sure that a bathroom is accessible for somebody again, who might be using a wheelchair or other mobility device to be able to get in, shut the door and use the bathroom, and then they can stay for a bit. Beyond that the rest of the house may not be accessible ... two storey house ... or even gaining access to the basement would be something that would be more difficult for somebody, again, with some mobility limitation..

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Karen Brown

Terrific. As we've discussed before, there is an issue with language and people calling the same thing, different terms and, you know, a plethora of terms that describe sort of kind of but not quite the same thing. So people may encounter terms like visitable design, enhanced visitability, adaptable housing, accessible housing and universal design. There was there's inclusive design and flex housing.

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Karen Brown

Some terms are more American and some are European. Where do we stand on all of this and how should people relate to those terms?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, it is. It is. It is it is tough. Yeah. And I mean, I, I grew up with, with my father being in a wheelchair. So, you know, even the language we used to speak about people with disabilities has has changed in time.

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Ron Wickman

So I don't even want to say some of the terms that were used when I was very very young. But a term like handicapped is something we don't like to use as much. And bottom line there, to just cut to the chase on this, when you're referring to somebody with a disability, just always put the individual or the person before the disability.

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Ron Wickman

So it's okay to say somebody is blind. You just say, I have a friend who is blind or I have a friend who is in a wheelchair or my mom has a mobility issue. So again, always the person first. And that's that's something I use as the trigger to verify whether the person I'm speaking to kind of has done some of their own research and maybe has talked about the issues more.

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Ron Wickman

So taking that to the various terms we use for accessibility here in Canada and we would often refer to it in the building industry as barrier-free design and the reason for that is that's how the

code talks about about the issue of accessibility so it's the barrier-free design guide, barrier-free issues, and that's simply removing barriers to accessibility.

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Ron Wickman

But again, that tends to focus on the disability itself and so in 1986 a gentleman, Ron Mace, who, who was an architect and used a wheelchair came up with the term universal design and ever since then in the United States, universal design is a term that's more often used than anything else and that really is trying to spin the concept of accessibility to include as many people as possible.

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Ron Wickman

So when they talk about designing products or building spaces, exterior, interior spaces, it's designed to accommodate small children and older adults and everybody in between. That same concept is used in the, in Europe where they talk mostly about inclusive design and that's inclusive and universal are sort of interchangeable. For myself, I've I've just concluded that when I talked to people here in Canada, I use the term accessibility because that's always what I end up coming back to anyway.

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Ron Wickman

So if I say I specialize in universal design or inclusive design, most people will say, what is that? And then I said, well, I specialize in designing for people with disabilities. And they go accessible. Yeah, accessible or barrier-free. So we kind of we kind of go back and forth. And so if I if I forget to mention it, I don't think I will,

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Ron Wickman

but I think the onus, again, is on all of us to educate ourselves and that's something you and I will be talking about throughout this podcast, is the more we know in the more we're educated about these issues of accessibility, the better we can talk to our politicians our friends, colleagues, builders, developers. So it's it's on us to to improve our own education on all of this and there's lots of information out there that you can find but there are very few experts, I must say, that at this stage.

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Karen Brown

Right. I think there was a really good lesson in the first part of what you said there, talking about putting the person first so you don't have a blind friend. You have a friend who is blind. That words matter. They matter a great deal and educating ourselves is really what these podcasts are all about. We're going to help to try to educate people.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. You know, like a lot of times I might be talking to somebody in the in the building industry and they'll say, oh, I've done lots of of buildings for those wheelchair people, and to me, that's just a trigger that probably you haven't because you're not even saying it right. So then I go, okay, well, I'm going to check you out a little bit more, right?

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Ron Wickman

So so I use that as my cue to, to help me assess the situation that I'm in because I mean, I think everybody likes to think that they know a lot about the, the issues and the topic, but it's a difficult one and it's, you know, I'm 57 now, I've been around it my, my whole life and every day I learn, I learn something new and, and how to how to approach the problem a little bit more strategically.

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Karen Brown

Right. And talk about adaptive housing, what that is and that speaks to the no step entrance.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. So the no step entrance would be part of what we call it adaptable housing so adaptable housing is is really one step up from visitable housing so the features I mentioned with visitable housing, that being the no step entrance the, the wider door and hallways, I shouldn't even say wider, but a wide enough door.

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Ron Wickman

So we're not asking for anything special. It's just a three foot wide door. So inside the house, it would be great to have all your doors be three feet wide. And that's certainly a trend that I've noticed is happening. So even in a in an extra bedroom, spare bedroom or or sometimes even in a washroom, the family washroom, the three, four, three foot wide door is being used more often.

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Ron Wickman

And the washroom is is what we what we find to be the trickiest space to to make adaptable but adaptable housing really means having a house that has purposely been designed in the first place. To allow for easy adaptations in the future. So if you had a house that was adaptable, it's not likely you would ever have to do any structural modifications to the house or anything really that would be moving walls or are adding space here or there.

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Ron Wickman

Everything's been done already so that the infrastructure is there, so the space is there. And then in terms of details in a bathroom, for example, there would be a plywood. I always put plywood floor to ceiling in a bathroom on all the walls, and then we finish it with drywall and, and then some waterproofing, maybe around a shower area, that kind of thing.

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Ron Wickman

And so as you grow, as you grow older or as your needs maybe change, you can add a grab bar anywhere you want. It's not specific to any kind of code issue or requirement.

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Karen Brown

So the plywood that you're talking about is something that people who have watched any of our programs or listen to other podcasts may have heard referred to as backing. Backing, correct?

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Ron Wickman

Yes. Yeah. And so the trend was always the backing was just put where your books on standards or your regulations would say, oh, we have put some backing at three feet above the floor. Well, not everybody in a wheelchair or with some mobility limitation needs it at that height. And so if we just abide by what the regulations or standards tell us, we're we're going to miss out on on so many people.

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Ron Wickman

So again, the backing becomes the entire wall surface.

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Karen Brown

Right. And, you know, case in point, a colleague of mine and yours as well, Julie, Sawchuck tells a story about building her bathroom and having the backing put in not all the way to the floor. And then she got a seat for the shower without realizing that the bottom strut anchored six inches above the floor so that the tile work had already been done and so on.

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Karen Brown

So they had to go in from the hallway, remove the drywall, install the backing and then re-drywall. So if you just, if you don't know what the future holds for you and who among us really does back the whole thing right now.

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Ron Wickman

And just, you know, just to tell the story of that, because it is relevant to our discussion about the no step entrance is I started my practice in the in the early nineties,

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Ron Wickman

and when I talked about adding backing in a bathroom for for the future use of grab bars, there was a lot of pushback, a lot of resistance from the industry saying, oh, you know, how much more expensive that's going to be? And so they would try to find scraps of lumber that were already at site and, and use them for, for filling in.

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Ron Wickman

So it took a great number of years for me to convince the industry and not just myself, but others convinced the industry that, you know, if you just do the backing all at once, it's not going to be that much more. And so today fast forward to 2022. It's not a, it's, it's not a question I get asked anymore.

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Ron Wickman

So if I say put the backing on all the walls of the bathroom, the builders just go, yeah, okay. No problem. I mean, they might be okay. There's this kind of pandemic thing that has happened the last couple of years and now a war that is causing a great deal of stress on, on our industry. But that's not, I mean, that's just that's something else that's something we can't control.

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Ron Wickman

But you know, generally the industry is, is becoming more adaptable themselves and more accepting of of these features because they see the wisdom in it and, and that's a great thing. That's a changing of the of the attitude, which is so important in all of this.

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Karen Brown

Right. And if you just do it while you're building it, as you say, then you don't have to tear it apart later and do a renovation.

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Karen Brown

You just get to put in the modifications that are

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Ron Wickman

needed. And again, again, sorry, but back to the the the buying public. They have to know these things, right? They have to know to ask the builder because if they say, oh, I you know, I want to make sure that I have I have the ability to add grab bars in the future.

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Ron Wickman

Well, that builder might not be as informed and go, okay, well, I'll, you know, I'll put some backing at three feet above the ground, but nowhere else and so if the home buyer says, oh, I, you know, I heard a podcast or I read an article or I talked to somebody that does this for, for a living and we should just put plywood on all the walls, then it just gets done right?

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Ron Wickman

Well, again, it's back to ourselves, educating ourselves on all of this.

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Karen Brown

And knowing what to ask for. And the more the more people ask, the more builders will think that that's a normal conversation to have. And then it doesn't become a conversation at all. They just do it.

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Ron Wickman

Exactly. Exactly. At the point, right? Yeah. Perfect.

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Karen Brown

Let's dig into the no step entrance a bit, because when you and I were preparing for this program, I was fascinated by what I learned from what you told me and so if you are a builder or a councillor or a planner, this section is really for you.

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Karen Brown

And if you're a homeowner, you need to know this stuff so that you know what you're buying or what you have the ability to modify.

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Ron Wickman

Yes. Yeah. So just to just to take you on a short journey of my time in all of this is, again, I approach this as a as a designer architect, as a, as an advocate for people with disabilities.

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Ron Wickman

So when I first read about visitability and I have to say that I lived in a visitable house without knowing it in the in the late sixties and seventies and, and beyond. So it wasn't until again in the in the late eighties that visitability even became a term. But we we lived it because my dad had to have a house that was accessible for him to get in and out of.

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Ron Wickman

But the, the the no step entrance concept was, was just against something that the builders just didn't really understand or appreciate. So they're just used to building a certain way and they even in my, my parents house that they, they built, it was still built to feed off the ground. And it was only at the 11th hour that my dad pointed out that he couldn't get in.

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Ron Wickman

And they sort of poured this really steep concrete ramp to the, to the back door for him to get in and out of and he used that for much of his life. And ,and again, in those days, the attitude was, well, you just have to live with it, right? This is just the way it is and so it took a long time to start, to, for me to start to appreciate that we do actually have the power to make change.

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Ron Wickman

Right. And so I started hearing about this idea of visitability, and I thought this is a great idea. And and then when I started hearing the the costs involved, I went, well, this is really a no brainer. This is so easy. Maybe \$300 extra to, to add or to make sure that you're, you're, you have a no step entrance at your house.

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Ron Wickman

And so I was pretty hard I have to admit on the on the building industry thinking you guys, like this is so easy like just do it right. And it was only as I started to get in, involved myself and starting to work with builders and work on house renovations and new homes that I started to realize oh this is actually a little bit more complicated than than I think I thought and so in this part of the world in Canada where we build with basements and we build mostly with wood we have to protect the wood from water and so that's the reason why we typically build at least two feet off the ground so

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Ron Wickman

that we can keep our floor joists away from the ground, and so all of a sudden you have to start thinking a little bit differently. So two things happen. One is you're change, you're, you're changing the way builders build. And secondly, there's there's the cost involved simply because there's more time involved. To start learning how how to actually do this.

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Ron Wickman

And since then, the building industry has started to pay more attention to this idea and and there are different innovative ways that we can talk a little bit more about innovative ways to do your foundation work and keep the wood away from the water. And then just, just to get us

to, to today what I've what I've come to realize is that all of this starts from the very beginning when we first have a a bare piece of land. A big, big piece of land where we might be eventually housing 30,000 people in various types of housings, housing, multifamily, single family housing.

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Ron Wickman

And the way we lay out the land in terms of of water management and our infrastructure, the sewer lines, water lines, all that is, is crucial to us actually going all the way back to achieving this no step entrance.

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Karen Brown

So take us to the sewage treatment plant and let's work back from there just because that's really fascinating.

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Ron Wickman

So yeah, I just wanted to pause there so I had a chance to breathe too.

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Ron Wickman

So yeah. So, so this is what's what's happened is I started my own work 20 years ago, you know, realizing that, yeah, this is really, this is really tricky stuff, right? And, and so I said, well, what's, what's the problem? We'll just we'll just build the house so that it's lower to the ground and then we can have a nice, gentle sidewalk to the entrance way.

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Ron Wickman

And then and then as I started to get into it, I realized, well, because we have basements, we want our basement floor to actually be lower, sorry, higher than the sewer invert. So the existing or the infrastructure that's been put into the ground, the sewer and then they call it an invert. So that's where when we flush our toilets, everything that's flushed down the toilet goes to this invert in the subdivision or the neighbourhood community that we're in.

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Ron Wickman

And that gets pumped up to what they call a a lift station. And those lift stations over, over many, many miles, let's say, or kilometers keep going down and then they get lifted up and down. And then eventually they they end up at the at a water treatment plant. So here in Edmonton, frankly, I'm not sure how many water treatment plants we have, but there aren't many.

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Ron Wickman

So so in a city, a sprawling city like Edmonton, there's lots of of neighbourhoods and there's lots of lift stations. And so, yeah, everything has to get out ultimately to the water treatment plant. And so, again, you work your way from where what the elevation of the water treatment plant is. And then, of course, everything has to go downhill.

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Ron Wickman

So you're just going through the series of downhill slopes to lift stations, pumping them up and then downhill slopes and so on. So when we when we actually get a piece of property that we can build a house on where we're, we're dictated the elevation of our our basement floor is dictated by whatever the existing sewer invert is.

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Ron Wickman

And so what I've been finding is that they're they're only as low as they have to be to make all of this work. So they could be lower. But the developers would argue that if we make it lower, we're digging further into the ground and we're increasing the cost of the development. So, so by the time I start working with a client and we start designing a house and we want this no step entrance, we have to think about the the basement floor ultimately and try to keep it above the sewer invert.

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Ron Wickman

And what I've been finding is that in many cases now we're realizing that to have a basement even an eight foot high floor to ceiling space, our basement floor is going to be lower. So what that means is then we have to have a sump or lift station within our home so that when we flush the toilets in our home, it goes to the lift station

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Ron Wickman

or the lift, yeah lift station or something in our home that gets pumped up to the sewer invert in our community. And then again, it eventually makes its way to the water treatment plant and that poses two problems. The lift station in our house. One is maybe not a big deal, but it is an increased cost of maybe three to \$5,000 to the overall budget of our home.

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Ron Wickman

The second thing that is potentially more problematic is if our, our, our lift station in our house actually fails, because then we have a real mess in our basement so that they're not designed to fail, obviously, but they are something mechanical. And most people would rather not have that if they didn't have, have to. So this is this is all something that I've been learning in the last 20 some years.

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Ron Wickman

And so it's it's it's a matter now of trying to figure out a way to design our neighbourhoods so that the the infrastructure is actually lower and the land is sculpted in a way that allows us to have these no step entrances, at least in some parts of the neighbourhood.

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Karen Brown

Right. So the sculpting piece becomes important because you could have some higher elevations in one corner and have the ability to go down further. But the house looks the same.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And you know, that's that's something too that I just kind of an overarching comment I'd like to make about this is, is with this issue of accessibility I often find that when I speak about accessibility, if, if people, if people feel they can't achieve 100% accessibility, then they completely shut down and then they do nothing.

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Ron Wickman

So I'm I've really been, especially in the last ten years, I've been saying to people something is better than nothing. So if you can't make 100% of your homes with your lots, your properties, so that they could have a no step entrance, at least make some of them that way. Right. So again, it just gets back to when the developer buys that piece of land, that big, big piece of land.

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Ron Wickman

And they're going to create a subdivision with roads and, and maybe a school, area of parkland and and single family house lots and multifamily house lots. If they're not thinking about this concept of accessibility and the no step entrance, then nothing's going to happen. So they have to say, let's, let's make this part of our conversation. So when we're designing this and laying out this neighbourhood, let's let's think about this and take advantage of perhaps areas of the property that do lend lend itself quite easily to visitable housing.

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Ron Wickman

So that's that's just it's got to be part of the conversation right from the very beginning.

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Karen Brown

And so that goes back to the planners at the municipal and county levels. And then to the members of council who have to approve this stuff. The council members have to be aware of who their constituents are. And for so many small towns, they've got aging populations.

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Karen Brown

And there is nothing that will make people leave their homes faster than an inability to get in and out of their house, coupled with an inability to use a washroom and keep themselves clean. They will have to leave the house. So if you're thinking about your community and who lives there and we've already talked about the fact that no step entrances benefit everybody.

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Karen Brown

I mean, I have a daughter with a baby and strollers and just getting in and out of places is another level of difficulty with all of that now. So it's not just the aging population, but I think if people do think about the aging population and build it for them, it's better for everybody, right?

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly.

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Ron Wickman

I'm just thinking about your comment about the baby carriage too. You know, in my in my neighbourhood, well, I have three grandkids now, so I'm seeing some pretty big baby carriages come to my house and my house is visitable as, as we'll see a little later. But one thing that I can say and actually take pride in is at Halloween, my house is the only one in the neighbourhood that people children with disabilities in wheelchairs, let's say, can actually come right to my door and I can hand out candy to them.

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Ron Wickman

Otherwise, they're getting mom or dad to come and collect the candy for them. And they're just always on the public sidewalks and never getting to I don't get to see the kids and greet them and all that. Right. So we all miss out on that, so ...

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Karen Brown

There was somebody that ran a Halloween program in neighbourhoods here in Ontario last year.

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Karen Brown

I wish I could remember the name of the company, but they ran a special program that had people taking their Halloween offerings to the sidewalk and they had signage, and that was all kinds of stuff people could have. So I don't know if that's a new thing or not. I just saw it for the first time this year.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah, it is. It is fairly new, but it is again, it's something that is happening, which is great. But again, all my life I've seen people with disabilities having to adapt to the conditions that exist, not the other way around. Right? So for, for a long time and my dad was not only was my dad somebody who used a wheelchair, but he was also a strong advocate himself, an activist and a politician.

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Ron Wickman

So, you know, I was around that kind of atmosphere and it was always watching him having to to accept what was there and that just wasn't good enough for him, right. So, so that's certainly in my DNA as well and so it's great that we we do adapt to the conditions that we live in but wouldn't it be so much better if we just made it so much easier?

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Karen Brown

For everyone.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah.

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Karen Brown

Right. Now, you had a couple of case studies that we're going to talk about. One with architectural control. So let's talk about that one first.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah, that that I did want to mention because that's also I don't know what to call it, kind of a systemic condition I guess, but architectural controls are are a North American thing.

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Ron Wickman

I've never heard of them being in in in Europe or Asia or anywhere else in the world. But they're they're mainly focused on, on newer, newer subdivisions. So suburban environments and the architectural controls are designed, I guess, in concept to have everybody in the neighbourhood kind of behave themselves, for lack of a better way to put it, and build houses that are sort of sort of the same to to improve the overall property value for everybody.

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Ron Wickman

So we can't just have a free for all. So there are there are planning controls to ensure that people are using the proper exterior materials, the having the right pitches of roof, things that that when you drive, I guess walk through or drive through the neighbourhood, you're seeing kind of a consistency that somebody's determined that, that helps keep property values high.

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Ron Wickman

And so in all of that, what I've found as a consistent architectural control out there is that homes have to have a minimum of three, at least three steps to the front door. So somehow it's been deemed that steps to the front door are appealing and people want them and they improve the resale value of the home and improve the sale of the home.

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Ron Wickman

So it's just we've been conditioned to think that this is a great thing and everybody should have it so when I do have clients that want to build a house without steps at the front door, we spend a lot of energy and time trying to navigate through the system, which doesn't normally allow for it. So we have to get special approvals from the developer and then we have to work our way through.

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Ron Wickman

As I mentioned, the issues around the sewer inverts and the way the land has already been designed to have the proper water management. So we're we're actually trying to change our specific lot to allow for the no step entrance, but it's going counter to everything that's been designed before. So it's really, really becomes a tricky a tricky problem.

00:32:21:07 - 00:32:52:24

Ron Wickman

And again, everything hinges on ultimately the, the, the people who who are who own the architectural controls to say whether we can even do it or not. So a lot of times in in architecturally controlled neighbourhoods, people give in to the idea that they need the steps at the front door and then they provide or they have an elevator within the house that you would enter from your garage.

00:32:52:26 - 00:33:22:33

Ron Wickman

Your attached garage at the front. So that's really counter to the concept of visitability, though, because to me, that's not a visitable home. That's just that's a home that's usable and functional for the resident of the home but for somebody a friend or family member who has to go through the garage, the big garage door to enter an elevator to get to the main floor level, that's really not to me, that's not a visitable home.

00:33:23:02 - 00:33:30:25

Karen Brown

That's a dignity issue. I mean, everybody should be able to go through the front door, right? Everybody, regardless Right.

00:33:30:25 - 00:33:31:12

Ron Wickman

Yes. Yeah.

00:33:31:12 - 00:33:39:34

Karen Brown

So who awards architectural controls? Is this something that the builder does or does the municipality have the right to

00:33:39:34 - 00:33:44:36

Karen Brown

award it or overrule it or who decides who has control?

00:33:44:36 - 00:33:48:48

Ron Wickman

It's it's basically it's just like an industry standard.

00:33:48:48 - 00:34:10:57

Ron Wickman

So it's, it's it's it's done by the developers themselves. So the the government has no real say. They, they they have a say in terms of the infrastructure, the sewer lines and water lines and all that. They have a say in the water management so there are certain codes in terms of grading of the, of the land and all that.

00:34:10:57 - 00:34:38:58

Ron Wickman

There's codes related to the creation of, of roadways and sidewalks. So roadways have to be you know, wide enough to accommodate emergency vehicles. Sidewalks have to be designed to again control and do the water management all that sort of stuff. But the architectural controls is purely a marketing thing. It's, it's just up to the, it's up to the the industry to determine, determine that.

00:34:39:08 - 00:35:01:08

Ron Wickman

So it's always changing the architecture controls, trying to adapt to, I guess what I never know if the market's demanding it or the builders or the developers are sort of creating the demand. So that's always a bit of a bit of a loaded issue. I guess

00:35:01:08 - 00:35:13:31

Karen Brown

My guess would be the latter because they like to build cookie cutter, they've got the pro forma, they just go ahead and do it. One, two, three, four, five. It's easier that way.

00:35:13:31 - 00:35:40:28

Ron Wickman

It's, it's, it's safer and then they can, they can it's easier to then control the, the costs and, and the rewards. Right. So the ability to make money if you're, if everything's controlled and safer. So overcoming that, countering it is the job of the planners, the councillors who have to ultimately approve it.

00:35:40:29 - 00:36:13:10

Ron Wickman

I, I, yeah. Like I think, I think government should definitely get more involved. I know that's here in Alberta. That's not a, not the greatest thing to say. So it's not, that's not a popular concept here, especially as opposed to other parts of Canada. But generally speaking, I think it's safe to say that the, the, the developers, builders, the people who make our housing would rather not have too much government say on things.

00:36:13:10 - 00:36:42:08

Ron Wickman

They, they like the idea that the market can kind of dictate what what actually gets built. But they're it's anything to do with more. This is I'm not talking about social housing when I talk about accessible housing, but, you know, anything to do with social housing, affordable housing, typically governments do have to step in and create some kind of situation where we can we can build we can build this kind of stuff.

00:36:42:08 - 00:37:09:01

Ron Wickman

So I know in the last federal election and and moving forward, governments are, especially here in North America, are talking more and more about the need for affordable housing so we're really seeing, you know, if nothing else, this pandemic has also shown that we haven't been doing a great job of taking care of our more vulnerable citizens, our aging population, our elders and people with disabilities.

00:37:09:28 - 00:37:44:51

Ron Wickman

And we have a real problem with affordable housing. So I think it's it's up to the government to somehow get involved and that's maybe not becoming developers themselves, but certainly certainly something with incentives, perhaps. And and and maybe some more rules and regulations. They certainly are are doing that when it comes to sustainable design and construction. So the government's quite involved in making sure that builders are paying attention to energy efficiency in their homes.

00:37:45:26 - 00:37:55:38

Ron Wickman

And there's, you know, there are incentives and rules and regulations related to that. So I don't see why that can't happen with accessibility as well.

00:37:55:38 - 00:38:09:23

Karen Brown

I agree with you. And, you know, it's not just one slice of the pie when politicians and the bureaucrats who work for them are looking at these sorts of issues, it's not just the housing sector piece of the pie.

00:38:09:23 - 00:38:29:02

Karen Brown

It speaks to the health care piece of the pie as well. I don't know too much about the home care situation in Alberta. But in Ontario, which is where I'm based, it's it's not great. There aren't enough people, there aren't enough long term care beds. But most people don't want to go into long term care. There aren't enough people to take care of home care.

00:38:29:52 - 00:38:50:43

Karen Brown

So if their homes could be the types of environments that could support them better as they aged that would have an impact on the health budget. So yeah, it's like the one hand scratches the back of the other hand. It all fits together so if they pull back and look at the bigger picture. They have to see this, you would think.

00:38:50:43 - 00:39:20:41

Ron Wickman

Yeah, that's a great that's a great way to put it to like to just pull back. That's that's something I've been really thinking about too is, is how do we get people to actually do that, right? And go, okay, let's just let's really revisit this whole issue, right? And and unfortunately, you know, your vast majority of, of people in, in, in politics to kind of keep their job, I guess for lack of a better way to put it, they have to be a bit shortsighted.

00:39:20:41 - 00:39:52:08

Ron Wickman

Right. They they want, the voting public, too, can be pretty finicky and have short memories. So you're only as good as your last, you know, mistake or or the last good thing you did. So for those politicians and I feel like my dad was one of those that was always thinking about the future and he somehow managed to navigate as a city councilor, navigate through that and and be a popular figure here in the city.

00:39:53:18 - 00:40:14:38

Ron Wickman

But he whenever he was getting in trouble, with the public, it was always with issues that he was thinking, you know, 20 years down the road. Right. He, he was thinking this this will really

be a good thing. 20 years down the road. But maybe, maybe right now we just got to bite the bullet and and pay for it.

00:40:14:38 - 00:40:39:37

Ron Wickman

So it's not a big issue today, so he was right, but curb cuts. He got a lot of political flak for insisting that we start doing curb cuts everywhere in Edmonton. And people said, oh, why like why are we spending all this money just for a few people who use wheelchairs? Now, today, nobody would say that. Right? So many people benefit again because baby carriages and all the rest.

00:40:39:37 - 00:41:03:54

Ron Wickman

So, you know, at the time, he could have gotten voted out of office because of what he was saying. But today, people, you know, they realize that this is just a good thing for everybody. So, you know, he always stuck to his guns. And I really appreciate that he he did that. But you know, even today, I just think it's I don't know, maybe the the voting public is a bit more finicky.

00:41:03:54 - 00:41:29:49

Ron Wickman

And they they just they're pretty hard on politicians as soon as you make a decision they don't like. And, and we're seeing that clearly. Right. So it is really hard to be somebody that's forward thinking, and when when you talk about ... I'm hoping that the listeners are appreciating that. You know what I'm saying? About the way we develop our our landscape out there.

00:41:30:21 - 00:41:48:27

Ron Wickman

This is not an easy fix. Right. It's not something that's just can happen overnight. This is a we're in this one for the long haul and it's going to be it's going to be a long time. So any politician that starts to push for this is not going to, you know, get a lot of especially from the industry, the building industry itself.

00:41:48:27 - 00:42:18:23

Ron Wickman

They're not going to get a lot of of acceptance. Right. They're going to get a lot of pushback. So it's a it's a tricky it's a tricky thing. But I'm hoping that, you know, clearer heads will prevail and we'll start to see that well, and I think, you know, the issue around our our elders and how we house them. If if people don't understand that it's a real it's a real big problem, then, yeah, I don't know.

00:42:19:14 - 00:42:38:47

Ron Wickman

I don't know what needs to happen. But certainly, I've I've never been busier in my time as an architect, you know, pushing for this than now. So builders, people are saying, how do I how do

I do this so that I can stay at home? Right. You know I'm like, well, have a, make sure you have a no step entrance.

00:42:38:47 - 00:42:41:38

Ron Wickman

Like, that's that's for starters. That's the first. That's the first thing.

00:42:41:38 - 00:42:59:29

Karen Brown

Yeah. Right. And so that's that's actually a good segue because you talk about making changes for the long term in an environment where neighbourhoods are being built but the other side of the coin is that we have quite a stock of houses that have already been built.

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Ron Wickman

Well, that's right.

00:43:01:35 - 00:43:03:17

Karen Brown

What do we do for those people?

00:43:03:17 - 00:43:39:09

Ron Wickman

Yeah. And and in some in some respects, the infill housing is even harder to achieve the no step entrance than than the the the newer subdivisions, you know, I guess the newer subdivisions without architectural controls, that demand stairs would be fine in a way. But again, historically, the way we've built in in Canada is with we would have started in in the early days like the, you know, thirties, forties, fifties, our basements wouldn't really be basements.

00:43:39:09 - 00:44:00:10

Ron Wickman

They'd be kind of more like crawl spaces. So if you go to a really old house, like a 100 year old house or 80 year old house, it might just be your foundation and, and like a dirt floor, you know, just like a space that might have some mechanical equipment in it, maybe like some storage of Christmas ornaments or whatever.

00:44:00:10 - 00:44:27:38

Ron Wickman

But it just wasn't really a used space per se. It was just it was enough to dig down into the ground to get below the frost level and have a, have a foundation for your house that, you know, doesn't allow your house to move around. But somewhere, you know, in the fifties, sixties, some clever people figured out that, you know, if we just dig a little bit deeper, we could have we could double the space of our house.

00:44:27:38 - 00:44:57:14

Ron Wickman

So a thousand square foot house could become 2000 square feet with this basement space. So the basement became extremely popular and again, always the way that we would have done our infrastructure would have been designed to get our sewer inverts just low or just low enough to be a little bit lower than our basement foundation. So if you're thinking I only got to be four feet below the ground, then that's your that's your infrastructure.

00:44:57:16 - 00:45:12:46

Karen Brown

That's a really interesting point because what you've just said is that at some point in the past, they justified the need to dig down a little deeper. And now we're wanting them to dig down just a little deeper again. It's the same thing. It is.

00:45:12:46 - 00:45:24:48

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. But, you know, you you could you could make an argument that 100% of the people saw the saw the benefits of the basement right, the basement space.

00:45:24:48 - 00:45:27:39

Ron Wickman

Like, it's just it's like bonus, bonus space.

00:45:27:39 - 00:45:28:56

Karen Brown

It's true.

00:45:28:56 - 00:45:48:07

Ron Wickman

And I would, I would like to argue that 100% of people would benefit from the no step entrance, but that's that's not the way it is right now. Right that's a tougher sell. So again, we're back to we're back to this sort of attitude. Well, why are we doing something that cost everybody more money

00:45:48:41 - 00:45:57:54

Ron Wickman

when it's only benefiting a few? So it's you know, that's that's a big part of our conversation, too, is just changing the the cultural attitudes towards all of this. Right.

00:45:57:54 - 00:45:59:46

Karen Brown

Yeah and showing the benefits more.

00:45:59:46 - 00:46:08:02

Ron Wickman

You're absolutely right. It's you know, the the other just a little bit of an aside, but I think it's important is the engineered floor joist.

00:46:08:43 - 00:46:36:12

Ron Wickman

When I started my my work as an architect in the in the early nineties, everything was like what they call dimensional lumber, which was just a two by ten or two by eight or solid wood. And somebody came up with this pre-engineered floor joist which could span a greater distance and still be structurally sound. And the way they promoted it initially was no more squeaky floors.

00:46:36:30 - 00:47:03:01

Ron Wickman

So in the nineties, the engineered floor joist was, was all about having no more squeaky floors. And then the plumbers and electricians and mechanical contractors went, wow, these, these, these floor joists, these engineered floor joists, I can actually, I can actually run my wires in the floor joist space and I'm now I'm eliminating bulkheads in the basement and I'm, I can span greater distances.

00:47:03:01 - 00:47:33:14

Ron Wickman

So I'm eliminating structural walls or teleposts in the basement. And that's when the buying public went, wow, this, I want this to. Right. And so within I started my I started working as a graduate in 1991. So I started working in architecture in the early nineties and like literally within five years it just changed completely. And so the floor joist was about three times the cost of dimensional lumber and within five years it was less than dimensional lumber.

00:47:34:04 - 00:48:02:11

Ron Wickman

And so I have seen and witnessed some change in the industry like seemingly overnight because everybody saw the benefit of it. And so again, I don't have that magic sort of bullet for the no step entrance because I, I think it's the same thing. I think everybody should see the benefit of it, but it, it hasn't, it hasn't happened yet,

00:48:02:11 - 00:48:15:39

Ron Wickman

right, so that's, that's why we still continue to promote it and talk about it and it's not just natural, right? Like it should, you should almost have to ask for steps instead of the other way around.

00:48:16:16 - 00:48:30:39

Karen Brown

Right. Somebody who has an existing home now, couple who raised their family and they've gone, but they want to keep the family home. How can they have a no step entrance or can they?

00:48:30:39 - 00:49:10:20

Ron Wickman

Yeah, so. So back to that. Yeah. So again, the history of of our infill development is, is again, it all goes back to we're a little bit constricted because of the existing infrastructure. So really for anybody that kind of spends a bit of time looking and driving and walking through neighbourhoods, you're, you're probably noticing more and more big wooden ramps typically leading to two doors or there sometimes you'll see a mechanical porch lift beside the front steps of a house.

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Ron Wickman

So people are doing that because they're having to make up quite a distance from the ground to the main floor, sometimes probably as low as two feet and then as maybe as high as four feet or five feet. And so when we think about a ramp being a one in 12 slope by code, so that means for every foot we go up, we have to go out 12 feet,

00:49:41:07 - 00:50:11:41

Ron Wickman

if you're four feet above the ground, then you're at least 48 feet of length of ramp and most people don't have that in their front yard. And so the other thing about infill is typically the distance from the front door to the public sidewalk is, is sometimes no more than 20 feet. So it is, it is difficult to just repair a sidewalk, for example, and just have it lead to the door.

00:50:11:43 - 00:50:30:43

Ron Wickman

The sidewalk would be just way too steep. So people end up putting ramps in and most of the ramps that I see and I think people would agree with me, they don't look very good. They're, they're not, you know, they're hard to make look sort of seamless and invisible or like they you know, they weren't part of the house right from the very beginning.

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Ron Wickman

So again, that's where I think people often see what an access ... what they think an accessible house is. This, this house with this big kind of ugly ramp in front of it. So that's, that's the real challenge. So to overcome those challenges, you have to if you wanted to renovate a house and potentially get again. Now, I'm talking about like a new build, right?

00:51:00:05 - 00:51:26:27

Ron Wickman

Tearing your house down and starting over, then you might have to actually lower the existing sewer lines, which starts to become way more than a \$5,000 extra. It's like 20 or \$30,000 more. So it just becomes really cost prohibitive. So I would say by and large, renovating a house to have the no step entrance, you have to have pretty ideal conditions to make it work.

00:51:27:05 - 00:51:36:23

Ron Wickman

And I would say a large part of the housing stock just doesn't lend itself that easily because it just wasn't, it wasn't thought about initially.

00:51:36:23 - 00:51:51:14

Karen Brown

I've seen some ramps that are actually very attractive. If people have the ability to take a beat and figure it out the ramps go horizontally with the house. So in two sections and then they're hidden by gardens.

00:51:52:30 - 00:52:14:23

Karen Brown

So it's not I've done this giant structure that splays out into the front yard or the, you know, any place else for that matter. It's it can be very nicely done if you're if you have the time. For a lot of people, though, they don't have the time because being able to get in and out of their house means the difference between being able to come home from rehab. Now, or having to wait.

00:52:14:23 - 00:52:16:20

Ron Wickman

Yeah, that's right.

00:52:16:20 - 00:52:18:55

Karen Brown

Now, you were able to achieve this in your home.

00:52:18:55 - 00:52:39:44

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. And just just to add to your comment, you know, I've done situations where we we've bypassed the front entrance as being accessible and then we just have a sidewalk that leads to the side door or into the back. So then you can do a, you have way more distance to play with.

00:52:39:46 - 00:53:03:55

Ron Wickman

And then you can have basically like a sloping sidewalk that just takes you to the back door. And that's often a esthetically that's a good option. But then again, in Canada and Edmonton where we get less snow, you just have more sidewalk to maintain and shovel and all that kind of stuff too. So it's, it's it's never it's never a perfect scenario.

00:53:03:55 - 00:53:25:08

Ron Wickman

But there, there I guess again back to this. If you, if you really give it some thought, you can come up with some pretty clever, clever solutions. So it's, it's not, don't, don't just reserve yourself to thinking, oh, well, I can't make the front door accessible. So then I'm done. I can't do anything right. Really think this through and know that there's other options that are available.

00:53:25:08 - 00:53:30:27

Ron Wickman

And that's where a good designer, a good builder will help you navigate through that.

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Karen Brown

Right. Because there are options. If the inside of the house basically can work. If the footprint can work, there are solutions for the exterior.

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Ron Wickman

Correct. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

00:53:41:33 - 00:53:47:49

Karen Brown

So let's talk about your house in particular because it was it was something that you did for your father.

00:53:49:08 - 00:54:20:09

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. Certainly for my father and certainly for our family that was growing, right. So at the time that we, this is a little over 20 years ago now, we had a bungalow with three steps to the front door and we were getting to that point where our three kids were getting older and needed, or didn't necessarily need but would have benefitted from, having some bigger bedrooms.

00:54:20:09 - 00:54:46:36

Ron Wickman

And I was working at home in our basement and so everything kind of came to a point where I felt like it was a good time for us to start looking at options again. So I I did look at what we could do with our, our house that we were living in. I looked at moving further into the suburbs, which I didn't like because I don't really like driving that much and I don't like architectural controls,

00:54:46:36 - 00:55:09:48

Ron Wickman

so I hope people are figuring that one out, and moving and move it. And primarily I was thinking about my kids going to school and they were part of a German program. So we knew the high school that they would go to and getting closer to the high school from where we were would have meant paying way more for the property and then we'd have to renovate anyway.

00:55:09:48 - 00:55:37:01

Ron Wickman

So, so everything kind of came back to why don't we add a second story to this house? So again, I, I wouldn't, I wouldn't necessarily recommend that today, but at the time 20, 20 some years ago it was barely financially doable. Today I just, it would be well over \$1,000,000. I just couldn't do it. But at the time the market was a little bit, a little bit better.

00:55:37:49 - 00:56:04:17

Ron Wickman

And we live in a neighbourhood that just is at the fringe of of being an inner city, mature neighbourhood and, and then a block south of us everything changed and the development started to be like cul de sacs and front car garages and that sort of thing. So our, our neighbourhood is still the older neighbourhood with back lanes.

00:56:05:02 - 00:56:27:52

Ron Wickman

Most people have detached garage garages in the back of their home. But in our case, what happened is we, we just happened to buy a house that was on what they, what they deemed the show home street. So when this development first was built in the late sixties, they were flirting with this idea, this concept of having the front car garage.

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Ron Wickman

So the house we purchased because it had four bedrooms, not because of had a front car garage, and was affordable for us. We were one of three houses that have front car garages on our street. And so our houses got a mixture of various types of dwellings, two stories, bungalows, split levels, So all this experimentation by the builders at the time trying to sort of showcase what they think the future look would look like for housing so in our case, instead of our house being 20 feet, our front door being 20 feet away from the street, we're well over 40 feet away from the street.

00:57:10:51 - 00:57:57:59

Ron Wickman

So when we did add the second story to the house, I made sure that we repoured our driveway and sidewalks so it just gently slopes to the door. And so just as we, just before we show the pictures here, I can just say that a typical Saturday for, for me, was to some somewhere just after lunchtime, I would hear my kids and I'd hear the phone ring and I'd hear my kids answer and then go running out the door and my dad would be parked in his van on our driveway and

he would have treats for his grandkids and he would give them the treats and they would run back in the house and by the

00:57:57:59 - 00:58:16:33

Ron Wickman

time I kind of gathered what was going on, I went out there and my dad was already backing up or, you know, so we might have a quick conversation and and he'd be gone and my dad and I were very, very close and I very much enjoyed spending time with him. He very much enjoyed spending time well with me.

00:58:16:33 - 00:58:52:37

Ron Wickman

But more and more so with my kids. So he really, really loved his grandkids and I just I just thought this is, this is really the epitome of of a bad situation, right? Where Grandpa can't spend time with his grandkids because of three steps at the front door. And so that became a vital part of of of what I did with the house and so, you know, the first time that he was able to visit without the steps out the door, he just wheeled up to the door and rang the doorbell and came in and and had time to sit and have coffee with us and watch the kids play with the toys he bought them

00:58:52:37 - 00:59:10:30

Ron Wickman

and the treats he got them and all that. So it really was huge in terms of the, the whole emotional side of things. Right? Not just the physical part of making it accessible for him, but just how much closer it brought him to to be with his with his own grandkids.

00:59:10:30 - 00:59:13:15

Karen Brown

That completely changed the dynamic.

00:59:13:15 - 00:59:15:39

Ron Wickman

Completely. Yeah.

00:59:16:13 - 00:59:16:24

Karen Brown

Wow.

00:59:16:24 - 00:59:46:33

Ron Wickman

Yeah. And it's, you know, seems so basic, right? But it's not, you know, it's something you see all the time and and somehow grandparents just, I think they kind of make it, you know, they'll make it work for them. But, you know I've, I've witnessed what it can be like. Right. And so I that's why I promote what I do, because I, I think every grandparent, now that I'm a

grandparent myself, every grandparent should have that joy of spending as much time as possible with their grandkids.

00:59:46:35 - 00:59:49:37

Ron Wickman

It's I don't think there's anything better in life than that.

00:59:49:37 - 01:00:19:15

Karen Brown

Absolutely. Well, we have some pictures that that we can show of your house and you can describe them now. We'll do our best to describe them. For those who are listening to this as a podcast, those of you who are watching this as a video presentation will see them but we'll put the slides onto our website with the show notes so that those who have heard it can then go and see it. Okay. We look at the first one

01:00:19:15 - 01:00:41:47

Ron Wickman

So just just just by way of explaining to this is my this is my house looking from the driveway and looking up the sloping sidewalk to the to the front door, the gentleman who's who's wheeling, he's just at the bottom of this sidewalk where the sort of the driveway transitions to the sidewalk.

01:00:42:09 - 01:01:16:13

Ron Wickman

This is a friend of mine who used a wheelchair and he was my model for the day to use a little bit of winter. Winter conditions, you can see the side of his van. So this would have been very typical of what my dad would have done as well. And so so this gentleman now can just, so any any of my clients, any of my own friends and family who use wheelchairs, baby carriages, and the other thing that we haven't mentioned, moving furniture, moving a washer dryer or a fridge like everybody loves this house for for those sorts of things.

01:01:16:58 - 01:01:41:58

Ron Wickman

So this gentleman is just starting to make his way up the sidewalk. It's not a ramp. It's just the sidewalk that is a very, has a very gentle slope. So we can go to the next slide which which shows him getting closer to the entrance way. Again, he uses a manual wheelchair so he propels himself up the slope and he's able to do that.

01:01:42:00 - 01:02:07:15

Ron Wickman

Now, you know, having said that, they're not everybody who uses a manual chair could necessarily negotiate this, this slope. It is very gentle, but it's it's not flat. So, so people that maybe have a little less arm power might need some help up, up the slope. But then you can you can see at the door there are no steps at the front door.

01:02:07:37 - 01:02:19:22

Karen Brown

That's actually a really good point, because I have talked to people who have been in wheelchairs who are unable to navigate the slopes that are determined by code.

01:02:19:22 - 01:02:19:53

Ron Wickman

Yes.

01:02:19:53 - 01:02:25:26

Karen Brown

So even even code is beyond their ability to manage it independently.

01:02:25:26 - 01:02:41:34

Ron Wickman

Yeah. And just, just for information for for the listeners, the code is the bare minimum. And it it is primarily based, code is primarily designed for those people who use manual wheelchairs.

01:02:41:34 - 01:03:00:23

Ron Wickman

And I'm going to say somebody like Rick Hansen. So a strong person who uses a manual wheelchair. That's how the code, that's what's reflected in our in our national building code. So if you are if you have less arm strength

01:03:00:23 - 01:03:01:20

Karen Brown

Or core.

01:03:01:20 - 01:03:09:36

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Or core or you use a larger power wheelchair there's a lot in the code that just wouldn't accommodate you.

01:03:10:08 - 01:03:13:33

Karen Brown

Right. Okay. So we move to the next one?

01:03:13:33 - 01:03:37:55

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. And then this just, just shows the gentleman. He's moved to the side. He's approached the door at the side. There's a lever door handle which again is in the sustainability world. We often talk about the, the, the light bulb, the energy efficient light bulb being that sort of easy thing that we can all do.

01:03:38:43 - 01:04:05:29

Ron Wickman

The lever door handle is that as well. The lever door handle is, is something we can all easily do and afford to do and it just makes life so much easier for anybody with limited hand mobility. You're carrying bags and you just use your elbow to open it up. We have, we have the door in our back leads out onto a patio that my son's dog has learned to from the outside, open the door push it open.

01:04:05:29 - 01:04:30:10

Ron Wickman

And then and then she's even smart enough to shut the door. So it's always great to see her do that. So, you know, it's sort of that benefit for for everybody. And so, yeah, this image is just showing him getting getting to the door. So I think as I as we're showing these pictures, too, I'm just kind of thinking out loud here, but something that I think can be quite powerful,

01:04:30:10 - 01:04:55:44

Ron Wickman

and the technology is there affordably and everything else, is creating little videos. So one of the things just going back to the Halloween concept is I'd love to have like a little video of of this scenario where, you know, a child is is making his or her way up to the door and getting treats from the homeowners in this this no step entrance.

01:04:55:44 - 01:05:02:36

Karen Brown

I think it could be a great video to, to promote, to promote this concept of the no step entrance.

01:05:02:36 - 01:05:03:44

Karen Brown

Right.

01:05:03:44 - 01:05:37:37

Ron Wickman

And then we'll just show the last the last slide. So this last slide just shows the, the, the gentleman in the wheelchair, shows his, his wheels, his front wheels and his feet approaching the door threshold. And certainly one of the things that in my time being around people who use wheelchairs, a lot of wheelchairs now compared to what my dad used, have much smaller front wheels and so my dad's front wheels were quite, quite big, actually.

01:05:37:37 - 01:06:07:28

Ron Wickman

So getting over even a minor bump was wasn't too hard. But these smaller wheelchairs and people who use walkers, for example, with the small wheels, even, even a minor bump can be

quite, quite challenging for people. So, so in this case, what we need to really think through with the actual door threshold is that we minimize any kind of bump at all.

01:06:07:58 - 01:06:11:30

Karen Brown

What is that? Quarter of an inch? It's not even a half inch, is it?

01:06:11:30 - 01:06:30:00

Ron Wickman

It's a quarter of an inch. Yeah. And it's at the door threshold. So what what we did in our case. So again, you know, they're, they're, when you think this through, you can come up with different ideas but in our case, we, we repoured or we poured the foundation with a notch in the where the door would be.

01:06:30:00 - 01:07:15:08

Ron Wickman

So we actually sunk the door into the foundation and then we could pour the concrete right up to the threshold. And then the interior flooring was right up to the door threshold and so that little quarter of an inch bump is there just to manage the water. So as this is something I've learned through trial and error, is if there is no bump like this, even a quarter an inch, what can like a a completely flat threshold, like a commercial kind of threshold the water, water can collect on your door and just come down the door and and once it hits the threshold, it either is going to go towards the inside of the house or

01:07:15:08 - 01:07:25:26

Ron Wickman

the outside. So that little quarter inch bump allows the water then to make sure that it ends up going to the to the outside.

01:07:25:26 - 01:07:28:35

Karen Brown

And you've also covered the walkway.

01:07:28:35 - 01:07:31:03

Ron Wickman

And then we and then we've covered the walkway as well. Yeah.

01:07:31:03 - 01:07:33:34

Karen Brown

And I'm sure there's really good weather stripping.

01:07:33:34 - 01:07:44:25

Ron Wickman

Yes. Yeah, yeah. And then and again, that's the one part the one thing that I can say to that was a huge advantage for us with our house is at the entrance

01:07:44:25 - 01:08:14:16

Ron Wickman

we did have to use special, not special. We had to use a different technique of waterproofing and so on. So we poured the foundation to the, the, the top of the floor level and then we actually have our floor joists inside the concrete foundation wall. So typically in, in, in construction we build our foundation wall in concrete and then we put our floor joists on top of that, which are wood.

01:08:14:40 - 01:08:42:12

Ron Wickman

So that's why we end up around two feet above the ground. This is our floor joists is usually at least 12 inches or 16 inches. And then we have to be another eight inches below the bottom of the floor. The wood part of the floor. So that's, that's typically why you'll see a couple, at least a couple of steps to a front door is, is because the land is lower than the main floor level.

01:08:42:41 - 01:09:10:26

Ron Wickman

And so in our house, we didn't have to modify or change anything. So where everywhere else in the house we're two feet above the ground level, but just at the door as that concrete slopes up, we just have a a waterproof membrane that separates any any of the floor from the the exterior. So it's just very, very simple, very, very inexpensive, but not commonly done.

01:09:11:04 - 01:09:34:13

Ron Wickman

And therefore, you have to make sure people, you communicate that to people. So again, if the buying public thinks that builders know all this stuff, then they're, they're in for a surprise. And so the, the more they know, the better, right, because they ... when the builder ... I've actually had people come to me and say, well, my builder told me the code doesn't allow me to have a no step entrance.

01:09:34:56 - 01:09:59:14

Ron Wickman

And I just say, well, that's completely false. So either the builder innocently doesn't know that or just doesn't want to bother learning or doing it, right? Either way, the person usually doesn't approach me until after the work was done. So by then it's too late. So, you know, again, it's important to to inform, inform as many people as possible that this is pretty simple stuff

01:09:59:56 - 01:10:01:47

Ron Wickman

but we just have to know that it's there.

01:10:01:47 - 01:10:20:49

Karen Brown

Right. And, but to be clear to people who may be listening and thinking, Oh, well, I could do this. You could do it as you said, because you had a nice long front yard. A deep front yard. People who don't have a deep front yard, which is normally the case in, in and in more current subdivisions and infill housing.

01:10:21:04 - 01:10:22:12

Ron Wickman

Yes. Yes.

01:10:22:12 - 01:10:39:11

Karen Brown

Right. This would not be an option for them, but definitely explore it. If you are in a neighbourhood that has provided you with a nice deep front yard, or maybe I've, I have seen subdivisions that have terrific front yards and hardly any backyard. So you know, you never know.

01:10:39:11 - 01:10:39:42

Ron Wickman

Yeah.

01:10:39:42 - 01:10:47:36

Karen Brown

If you have sufficient room this could be an option for you if you don't have sufficient room we have to look at the ramps in the lifts.

01:10:47:36 - 01:11:10:19

Ron Wickman

Correct. Yeah. And one thing that I often that helps I think helps people when they first contact me and they, they say, well you know, we're thinking of, of trying to find a home that we could modify. Do you have any recommendations. I always say the first thing you can do is when you drive up to their house, what is the distance from the main floor to the ground?

01:11:10:19 - 01:11:37:15

Ron Wickman

So essentially how many steps are at the front door? And that right away that will tell you. If there's two steps that's, that's better. If there's five or six steps, you're you're probably looking at some sort of addition to the house that will have, you know, I've met, well, maybe a ramp or a porch lift, but, you know, often like an additional but anyway, no matter how you slice it, it's going to be more expensive and harder to do.

01:11:37:17 - 01:11:58:03

Ron Wickman

So you always first want to just drive by houses and go, wow, that house for sale is really low to the ground. That might be a good option. And then once you're inside, you have to look at okay, when I'm inside, are there steps anywhere leading up to the level like can I enter and then have to go up a few steps or am I right at that main floor level?

01:11:58:19 - 01:12:13:02

Ron Wickman

And then of course, the bathroom is always, always going to be the trickiest part of the reno. But you can you can you can save yourself a lot of time by just driving around and finding a house that already looks like it's worth going inside and checking it out.

01:12:13:02 - 01:12:30:46

Karen Brown

Right now, there are housing developments that are being built with government support that are looking at issues like adaptability and accessibility. And I'm thinking of the one in Winnipeg called Bridgewater. Can you tell us about that development?

01:12:30:46 - 01:12:54:48

Ron Wickman

Yeah, yeah. I did manage to learn quite a bit about Bridgewater myself when I was working on a task force on visitability. And, and just to, just to back up a little bit, our inspiration actually, or the inspiration for Bridgewater came from Chicago neighbourhood, just outside of Chicago called Boilingbrook.

01:12:56:05 - 01:13:23:38

Ron Wickman

And Boilingbrook has an interesting history in that they they try to create regulations for visitable housing. So it's like actual government imposed rules that said, you have to make your homes visitable. And they got a lot of pushback from the industry of course that's that that's to be expected. But in the end the industry itself went, you know, this is actually a pretty good idea.

01:13:23:38 - 01:13:56:14

Ron Wickman

Let's let's do it. And so I've never been to Bolingbrook myself, but I've talked to others that have been there and, and what I know about it is that a huge number like eight, maybe even 75 to 80% of the homes are being built to be visitable. And it, it started as a government kind of forced issue, legislated issue that morphed into something that the market kind of accepted and and bought into and and enjoy and benefit from.

01:13:56:54 - 01:14:46:11

Ron Wickman

So that that was one of the things that really helped, helped the people that orchestrated Bridgewater in, in Winnipeg to do what they did. And it's a provincially funded and initiated

development. It's, it's supposed to house roughly 30,000 residents in single family, in multi-family homes and and visitability was on the table right from the beginning. So, so they, they basically we outlined areas within the development that amounts to about 25% of the homes single family homes to be visitable.

01:14:46:11 - 01:15:16:29

Ron Wickman

So the actual land has been designed with the proper infrastructure, sewer lines, water lines, that sort of thing, and the landscaping with water management and so on to lend themselves very nicely to the builder just buying the lot and building the house on what's there so they don't have to do extra work to sculpt the land or you know, think about sewer, sump pumps in the house or anything like that.

01:15:16:29 - 01:15:45:30

Ron Wickman

They could just, just build like they normally do and just not have steps at the front door and in, and speaking with some of the builders that did it, they they went, Yeah, we, we kind of resisted at first because we didn't know, we didn't know what we were getting ourselves into. But once we built you know, one and then, and then more, this was really easy and it just makes really good sense.

01:15:45:30 - 01:16:14:09

Ron Wickman

But everything was done in the beginning to make it easy. For the builder later on. So again, that gets back to the government instigating this and starting it right? That's what we really need. I think whether it's financially or however they make it, you know, financially, I guess is ultimately what you'd like to see. But it's got to be there's got to be the political will first and then everything else will, you know, kind of follow, I think.

01:16:14:09 - 01:16:23:07

Ron Wickman

Right. And so Bridgewater is the only example that I'm aware of in Canada that really is it has pushed it to this this new level.

01:16:23:07 - 01:16:36:36

Karen Brown

It's really interesting that in the beginning there was pushback from the professionals involved in this. All the builders the designers and whatnot. And then as they got accustomed to it, they thought this is pretty good and they actually are interested in doing this again.

01:16:37:24 - 01:16:37:53

Ron Wickman

Yes.

01:16:37:53 - 01:16:42:50

Karen Brown

Now they have this whole other mindset and skill set about how to make this happen.

01:16:45:14 - 01:16:46:08

Ron Wickman

Yeah.

01:16:46:08 - 01:16:51:50

Karen Brown

So Bridgewater is something that is in the process of being built or how built out is it?

01:16:51:50 - 01:17:22:48

Ron Wickman

It, I, it's, it's, it's actually quite built up. I'm not sure if it's completely finished, but I think it is actually. I think it is completely finished. Yeah. So yes, I from what I heard, the initially the again, perfectly in line with what you're talking about with the pushback, I think very few visitable homes were built in the first go around and, and then the government went, well, this is dumb, like we got, we got to push this harder.

01:17:22:48 - 01:18:06:41

Ron Wickman

So then they got you know, they got further involved and then the next go around they they got up to that 25% and yeah, you know that that's sort of if you build it they will come kind of thing I guess. But it's a little bit unfortunate that it hasn't caught on more and sort of spread across the country here in Edmonton we have a our old downtown airport is a is a perfect piece of land to do visitable housing and I haven't actually had a lot of success myself and others that are pushing for this with with our current or sorry I shouldn't say current city council. The older city council. We have a, we

01:18:06:41 - 01:18:38:49

Ron Wickman

have a new council with some I think some really innovative and and forward thinking young people that I think will will truly revisit this whole issue. And we also have our old we call our Expo site where the the Edmonton Oilers used to play hockey. And that whole area is is set for redevelopment. So we have a lot of tremendous opportunities just here in Edmonton to to do some really great things.

01:18:39:48 - 01:19:07:37

Karen Brown

And again, we just we really, really need the political will. And I have to say that I was pleasantly surprised and, and to see that the current council vote when the elections happened and some of the people that are that are council members now and I think we also have very progressive and forward thinking mayor as well. So good, good opportunities here for for all of this.

01:19:08:13 - 01:19:20:05

Karen Brown

Right. And there could be right across the country and indeed around the world if they started looking at this sort of housing as a benefit to everyone for so many reasons. Right.

01:19:20:05 - 01:19:41:25

Ron Wickman

Yeah. Yeah. And really and tying everything in with this concept of sustainability because I think we all we all have an under, well, I shouldn't say we all, but most of us have a pretty good understanding of sustainability and energy efficiency and and how we can build to create more affordable housing that is also energy efficient.

01:19:41:25 - 01:20:13:17

Ron Wickman

And ultimately, we benefit as individual homeowners, but society benefits overall. And, and we really have to talk about accessibility in the same way. It's, it's really just a part of our whole sustainability issue and our and our talk. And, and unfortunately, most people that I know who push for a more sustainable type of design don't always appreciate or understand what the role of accessibility is in all of this.

01:20:13:17 - 01:20:24:57

Ron Wickman

Whereas those of us in the accessibility world completely understand that this is this is part of a bigger issue, which is having a more sustainable way of developing our lands.

01:20:25:21 - 01:20:27:50

Karen Brown

And living our lives.

01:20:27:50 - 01:20:28:33

Ron Wickman

Correct. Yeah.

01:20:29:07 - 01:20:33:33

Karen Brown

Right. Any last thoughts before we wrap up

01:20:33:47 - 01:20:35:48

Ron Wickman

No. I'm just saying ...

01:20:35:48 - 01:20:37:06

Karen Brown

We've talked about a lot.

01:20:37:06 - 01:20:42:30

Ron Wickman

I'm hoping yeah, I'm hoping a lot of people are tuning in and and taking notes.

01:20:42:30 - 01:21:11:50

Ron Wickman

And I'm certainly I have to say, I am much busier these days. So I used to pride myself on getting back to everybody that contacted, reached out to me. That is frankly getting a little harder. A lot of times people will email me or for me and I just direct them to my website at least so that they can they can get a sense of of my website is really not promoting my architectural abilities.

01:21:11:50 - 01:21:39:26

Ron Wickman

It's more the accessibility side of things. So, so people can learn a lot about accessibility from the website and, and they can, they can involve me in projects if they want. But more importantly, I think they just need to inform themselves. Right? And, and educate themselves and and then start spreading, spreading that out there. So it's, you know, it's, it's sort of like throwing that pebble in the pond and hoping it has that ripple effect.

01:21:39:26 - 01:22:04:26

Ron Wickman

So you know, for, like I said, I've been around this a long time and I know that my dad had a huge impact on what we see here in Edmonton. But I have to say that there for quite a long time, there was a real lull in things where the issues weren't being discussed as much. And it's just I think we've hit a critical mass of of our of our senior population.

01:22:04:26 - 01:22:32:22

Ron Wickman

That's that's really getting and the pandemic obviously didn't didn't are. Yeah, it didn't help in any way, but certainly exposed the issues. So people are starting to talk about it more and see that, you know, there there should be a better way to to create housing and live, you know, with a stronger community spirit and and live longer in the house that you that you, you know, you buy when you're a young couple, let's say.

01:22:32:22 - 01:22:35:32

Karen Brown

Right in the community that you've come to love and you know where everything is.

01:22:36:00 - 01:22:37:20

Ron Wickman

Yeah.

01:22:37:20 - 01:22:56:27

Karen Brown

Terrific. Well, we'll put your website with the show notes along with the pictures. And I'm going to try to find a link for Bolingbrook in Chicago. I know that there is one for Bridgewater in Winnipeg, so I'll put all of that information with the show notes so that people can take a look. Great. Thank you very much for joining us again.

01:22:56:36 - 01:22:58:13

Ron Wickman

Hey, thanks for having me.

01:22:58:13 - 01:23:06:37

Karen Brown

My pleasure. And I would invite any of our listeners to come back for future editions of the Real Life Renos Podcast.

01:23:08:50 - 01:23:24:14

Karen Brown

Real Life Renos, The Podcast, is a production of Reno Studios. executive produced by 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.