

Small Towns and Words That Matter

00;00;01;05 - 00;00;25;29

Speaker 1

Welcome to Real life Renos: The Podcast. This is part two of our conversation with Robert Lipka, who is currently a Principal Urban designer with the City of Edmonton. Also joining in the conversation is Ron Wickman, an architect who specializes in barrier free design. Our conversation focused on small towns and the challenges of becoming accessible when century buildings weren't built with accessibility, much less universal design in mind.

00;00;26;01 - 00;00;32;10

Speaker 1

Speaking of universal design, later on in the podcast, we chatted about words and how much they matter.

00;00;32;10 - 00;00;57;07

Karen Brown

Welcome back. And it's good to have Ron Wickman with us again. And of course, Robert Lupica has joined us, as promised in the last podcast. We're going to take a look in this podcast at urban development and the plight that many small towns are finding themselves in, where, you know, they have these centuries old buildings that really aren't accessible.

00;00;57;07 - 00;01;09;00

Karen Brown

They've got narrow sidewalks. There's no place to park, certainly not for an accessible vehicle. How do we solve all of this, Robert? We're we're looking to people like you to solve these problems for us.

00;01;09;02 - 00;01;29;13

Robert Lipka

Well, that's that's a well, I could go on for hours for that one care. But I'll try to make it short and sweet. But I think, you know, from a real of, you know, as we were talking about, a while back, you know, even though I grew up in downtown Toronto, I grew up in a village, like, the area is called blur Dale.

00;01;29;13 - 00;01;49;23

Robert Lipka

For those who know you. Toronto, it's just north of Parkdale, which is more, famous for some good and bad reasons. It's rough for my perspective. But anyway, Yeah, the community where I grew up in all of my schools where, that I went from, you know, zero to finishing high school. we're within five minute walk from my house.

00;01;49;25 - 00;02;08;17

Robert Lipka

All the shopping, all the food stores, all the clothing stores, everything you wanted was in five minute walk. So, you know, we beat the whole 15 minutes city thing. We had a five minute city where I grew up in. So that's used to be the beauty of small towns, right? If you drive throughout, especially in Ontario, where you are from, Ontario.

00;02;08;17 - 00;02;29;01

Robert Lipka

So I know, but also even in, smaller towns in Alberta as well, which I've been to a number of them so far. Haven't seen them all yet. but, you know, they do have a center, right? They have, a heart. They have, you know, that usually there's the community center. There's the Legion. there are other, you know, kind of draws, to get into the village.

00;02;29;01 - 00;02;54;03

Robert Lipka

But unfortunately, over time, you know, developers have come in, looked at, you know, redeveloping, farmland, further out from the village center to build, you know, big box retail. Right? So you're getting your Walmarts, your, your superstores, your etc., etc.. and so unfortunately, over time, you know, a lot of the smaller shops that used to be in these, village centers absolutely died.

00;02;54;06 - 00;03;18;24

Robert Lipka

and there's not much to replace them, unfortunately. And, and so you're having people who are basically living in their car, driving

everywhere, to get anything, if they live in a, in a rural community and so that just makes it more difficult. You raised a good point about a lot of the older buildings in these, older villages and smaller, you know, hamlets and towns, weren't accessible.

00;03;18;27 - 00;03;51;05

Robert Lipka

but to me, the answer is not, you know, building massive Walmarts further out so that people have to drive to them because sometimes those aren't, even though, you know, they're just big flat, you know, shop, sometimes the parking lots aren't very well designed from an accessibility perspective. I'm sure Ron can tell you stories that, and so, you know, the it's the, you know, the concept of trying to make the hamlet or the village center more accessible is possible.

00;03;51;08 - 00;04;10;21

Robert Lipka

it's obviously going to take some time. but, you know, redeveloping some of these older buildings, you could put ramps on them, at the front or at the side of the building or even at the rear, because a lot of them have rear alley access so if you make improve the alleyways, the realities, then you could make them more accessible.

00;04;10;23 - 00;04;29;18

Robert Lipka

you have people repurposing some of these old, kind of older, smaller kind of factory buildings that are all one level. So that's perfect. you could do something amazing with those buildings as well in some of the smaller communities. so there's a lot of opportunities up there, to definitely make these smaller towns, more accessible.

00;04;29;21 - 00;04;32;00

Karen Brown

Ron, what say you?

00;04;32;03 - 00;05;01;03

Ron Wickman

Well, it, interestingly enough, I, you know, I was thinking, back to when I started my, my own practice. So that was 1995. And, at the time, I, I honestly didn't know or think that other architects, didn't know what I knew about accessibility, so I just assumed that, everybody, every architect knew a lot about accessibility.

00:05:01:05 - 00:05:35:18

Ron Wickman

And maybe my edge was that I knew it a little bit better. But, you know, I've since discovered that that's not completely true. And I thought as a kind of marketing strategy for myself, I would target small towns. So instead of, competing with the the big firms in Edmonton and, for work, I would go into small towns thinking about the fact that, the population is aging and, thinking, well, you know, they're going to have to make their little, city hall, more accessible,

00:05:35:21 - 00:05:58:13

Ron Wickman

the shops, every restaurants, coffee shops, everything more accessible. I thought this would be a good opportunity for me to get some works out. Maybe a lot of the other architects wouldn't really be looking for, interestingly enough, I ended up learning a lot about marketing myself and and just getting comfortable with talking about what I can provide services.

00:05:58:13 - 00:06:05:07

Ron Wickman

So on learning a little bit more about the business of being an architect. But I don't remember ever getting any work.

00:06:05:09 - 00:06:07:09

Robert Lipka

{laughter} yeah.

00:06:07:14 - 00:06:31:05

Ron Wickman

So, luckily I, you know, picked up some work here and there. I did some house renovations and, and, it didn't take long before, you know, word got out that I did have this unique take on, on, on

design, from, you know, from an accessibility point of view. And then it just kind of slowly, grew from there.

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Ron Wickman

what's interesting is today I'm getting asked more and more now to, by small towns to kind of have a look at things and, and just in a really, interesting twist of fate, my, my son and his wife and family, they started a small craft brewery in Devon, which is, about a 30 minute drive from Edmonton just between Edmonton and the, the international airport.

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Ron Wickman

It's a small community of about 6000 people. And, they, they wanted to create something that had a bit of a community feel, something that people would feel comfortable, coming in and joining in on, just good gatherings. So although it is, a place where you drink alcohol, craft beer is way too expensive to,

00;07;29;21 - 00;07;51;13

Ron Wickman

to to have too many, before you break your budget. So it's just a good place for people to socialize the, the my kids have worked really hard to have, like, events like trivia night and and, they have, artists and singers coming. and it's just become a bit of a hub. And it's been really interesting watching that from my point of view

00;07;51;15 - 00;08;22;05

Ron Wickman

seeing how a small business can, can really, get people to gather and bring people together. And, certainly one thing from my point of view in helping them out was to make sure the space was super accessible. So they're very accommodating to to people with different, disabilities, certainly accessible bathrooms and so on. And we've got some visual aids, some, some, we've got a hearing loop at the front counter for people who use hearing aids and so on.

00;08;22;06 - 00;08;41;27

Ron Wickman

So, I'm, I'm kind of now sort of slowly investing some of my own time and spirit into what could Devon look like? It's a it's a place where people can bike to from Edmonton within 20 minutes or so and half an hour maybe. So it's almost as quick to get to Devon by bicycle as it is by car.

00;08;41;29 - 00;08;47;07

Karen Brown

So just to get back to the building for a second run, was it an existing building or a.

00;08;47;13 - 00;09;04;07

Ron Wickman

Yeah, yeah. So it's just off the, the center street, where there's a bunch of your older buildings and it's a, it is a strip. It is a, a space within a strip mall. So it already has, kind of the on grade access.

00;09;04;10 - 00;09;08;06

Karen Brown

So they didn't have to do much in terms of entrance. It was inside.

00;09;08;08 - 00;09;32;06

Ron Wickman

That's right. Yeah. And then, they were looking at one point on, on the main street, but they're so close to the main street. And, you know, as it turns out, they've got this big parking lot just outside their, their space. So in the summer they were able to they will they've been open less than a year or so in the summer when they open, they were able to take over a bunch of parking stalls and have an outdoor patio area.

00;09;32;06 - 00;10;05;12

Ron Wickman

And what what's also interesting is that the, the, the Devon Council, the decision makers in Devon were very much in favor of this. So they've done everything to support this small business to, to invest in their community. So there's probably, more interest from small cities to, to get some of this stuff done because they do want to create, a nice little place for, for the residents.

00;10;05;12 - 00;10;36;21

Ron Wickman

And, and they do recognize that the, the residents of rural Alberta are, are generally aging. Right? So more so than even in cities. So so I agree totally with Robert that we should, somehow fight the, the big box stores from infiltrating these small towns and create a, a town that is, more conducive to pedestrians and people on bikes and, and so on.

00;10;36;23 - 00;10;40;28

Ron Wickman

but economics, you know, that it's that's a it's the double edged sword.

00;10;41;01 - 00;11;00;25

Robert Lipka

It's it's a tough one. It's a tough one. I was asked I just thinking about it when you're talking, Ron, I was asked to go to speak to a group in Larcombe. the, the city planners and the mayor actually is really keen. And that's what's a great thing about the smaller towns is they can actually make things make, make change happen quicker,

00;11;00;28 - 00;11;33;22

Robert Lipka

right, as you alluded to. And, and I gave them, I provided a, presentation on accessibility and they showed me some of the shops that are really keen along the, their main street to be more accessible. And I showed them some imagery of ramps that they could put in, making sure that, you know, obviously they can actually safely access the, you know, the, the shop, but also that they a lot of ramps that when the stores put them in, they can be quite dangerous for somebody with low vision because they're hard to see sometimes,

00;11;33;22 - 00;11;49;22

Robert Lipka

right, so making sure they have proper barriers around them and maybe they're a brighter color. So they stand out a bit more. this

would be a lot harder to deliver in a, in a large city like, you know, we're in Edmonton or I am, but in a smaller town, you could start rolling some of these things out, right?

00;11;49;22 - 00;12;18;02

Robert Lipka

You could put in ramps and in particular places. and they could I suggested to them as a more longer term goal is to actually look at widening, maybe not necessarily widening their entire sidewalk because that's costly. But what they could do is actually take one of the parking lanes or the driving lanes out. they have to, they could make it a one way street, their main street, and actually push out the parking to the next lane out.

00;12;18;04 - 00;12;42;25

Robert Lipka

And then that old parking lane could be a lane where, basically pedestrians could use. So you just have ramps on either end of it and, people on mobility chair will, you know, you know, have wheelchairs, etcetera, could actually access, that space because it's nice and flat. you know, it's, it's, pretty smooth and, very accessible.

00;12;42;25 - 00;13;04;19

Robert Lipka

So that's something they could consider, further down the line. and small towns can do that because they can do a heck of a lot quicker. you'll see that if you go to some or small some other small towns in Alberta, they're implementing tactile walking surface indicators, the twisties, the little yellow dots at intersections. They're putting them in, on their main streets.

00;13;04;19 - 00;13;08;24

Robert Lipka

It's incredible. whereas we're still struggling to do that in Edmonton. Yeah.

00;13;08;26 - 00;13;41;29

Karen Brown

So in Edmonton you have a design guideline. And that is something that a lot of big cities have some smaller counties and so forth do as well. But as you have previously noted, it really only applies to the municipally owned buildings owned and operated essentially, or the ones that are leased out in terms of the older buildings that are owned by the people who run stores in them, you're indicating that there is some interest in in accessibility.

00;13;42;01 - 00;14;09;09

Karen Brown

What about the towns that have a large percentage of buildings owned as an investment by somebody in a big city far, far away? How can they be incentivized? Is there anything that is being done with the guidelines that Edmonton has as a, for instance, that could be duplicated elsewhere? But then how do you incentivize these? owners who aren't there?

00;14;09;11 - 00;14;20;21

Karen Brown

Maybe they go once a year or something, but they do everything else remotely, and they just are interested in renting it out and having the investment. How do you incentivize them to help their tenants become more accessible?

00;14;20;24 - 00;14;43;09

Robert Lipka

Yeah, that's definitely more difficult. I guess there's there's two I guess there's, two separate questions there. The first one, with respect to some sort of guideline or standard document actually run mentioned that both of, myself and I, him sit on the safety codes Council of Alberta, which has the, very free design guide. So the barrier free design guide applies all across the province.

00;14;43;16 - 00;15;08;21

Robert Lipka

So any of these small towns could use that document. for their benefit. Right. So it's like, similar to what we have, the city of Edmonton created the access design guide. separately, I tried to bring the two together. but the city was really adamant about creating its own document because there are some things in the

very free design guide that, you know, don't are covered, for the city of Edmonton, i.e. LRT right.

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Robert Lipka

So not every city has, like rapid transit, or even a bus, you know, a bus system. and so those are the things that amongst other things that are covered in our access design guide, but quite frankly, the barrier free design guide, for the province of Alberta, from the Safety Codes Council is very, thorough and it could be very helpful to smaller municipalities.

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Robert Lipka

So they could use that, push it in front of developers and say, hey, you know, here's some ways we could redesign, the front, you know, access of your building to make it more accessible. Now, the second part of it is trying to encourage people, that's the tougher one, especially if they're if they they're not, like, as you said, Karen, if they don't live in the, in the town where they own the property, that's definitely going to be more difficult.

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Robert Lipka

But having worked with a lot of business owners in a previous life, when I used to be a consultant before I started working for government, quite frankly, like, I don't understand why a business owner would want to not, encourage between 25 to 27% of the population in Alberta has some form of of disability that is, hindered by the built environment.

00;16;21;16 - 00;16;45;10

Robert Lipka

So basically you're cutting out 25% or more of your future customers, right? So to me, that's not good business. So, you know, that's where I would try to sell it to them and help them by showing these guidelines. that would make it a little bit easier for them to, design, because as Ron pointed out, there's a lot of architects out there that really need some training.

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Robert Lipka

And I know Ron's been doing a heck of a job to try to upskill people. but yeah, it's amazing how many architects they deal with on a daily basis or, you know, talking about, developments that they're working on. And some of them do have some knowledge of accessibility, which is great. Point them to our access design guide.

00;17;04;20 - 00;17;12;05

Robert Lipka

Like, I know they don't have to follow it, but here, have a look. but yeah, there are a lot of architects out there that don't have a clue.

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Karen Brown

Yes, Ron, anything in defense of the architects? No, I mean, in a previous podcast, you said that when you were being, educated, the only way that the topic was brought up was when you brought it up. And that's because you had a family reference. So, yeah, again, it goes back to schooling, which we've mentioned so many times.

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Karen Brown

The professionals, the trades, they're not taught this stuff in school.

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Ron Wickman

Yeah. Well exactly. And it's, it's, it's it's not just the design world, but it, you know, we talked a bit about people in the general public, builders, developers, it, it, you know, just it's a topic that's been around for a long time, but it's still not well understood. So it it seems that people really will engage the issue of accessibility when it really hits, hits them personally.

00;18;08;13 - 00;18;51;13

Ron Wickman

Right. So either themselves or a family member or so on. And so it, it is it it's a tough struggle to, to, make some of these, positive

changes for accessibility when people don't understand what truly what the benefits are. Right. So we've we've tried to promote it as something that it's just, you know, morally, it's the right thing to do that you know, that might affect some people, but, it it's we've tried to say there's economic benefits to it, but until somebody does it and make it, you know, makes it work, financially, in a real positive way, you know, they're kind of waiting for somebody to invest time and

00;18;51;13 - 00;19;19;19

Ron Wickman

money into that to see, see how they do. we've tried to make the case that we can make it beautiful and that that benefits everybody. Certainly. I think the thing that's really gained traction is, is the fact that, we can argue that, you know, curb cut is a good example of something that was originally designed for a very specific population of people, that now we see the benefits of it.

00;19;19;19 - 00;19;53;03

Ron Wickman

Right? So that this thing we call the curb cut effect, where we design something that is specific to a population, of people, but then we realize it benefits everybody, in a really positive way. So there's all of that. But, you know, again, I guess for me, at this point in my life, what I really feel needs to happen is that we need to develop, a critical mass of understanding, a critical mass of people that truly understand the issues enough to to move the needle forward, so to speak.

00;19;53;03 - 00;20;14;04

Ron Wickman

Right. So, I think in many ways, Robert and I kind of feel like we're in small boats all by ourselves, you know, in amongst all these people that they're all working on important things. But, they just, I don't know, for some reason, they just kind of leave us alone. And don't always want to listen to us.

00;20;14;06 - 00;20;35;09

Ron Wickman

And, and so, yeah, I don't know how to, you know, I think inevitably time will just allow us to have that happen. But, I'm, I'm turning 60 this year, so I keep saying, like, okay, I'm on the wrong side of time now. So, I, you know, I want to see some real positive change, and I certainly have in my lifetime.

00;20;35;09 - 00;20;40;29

Ron Wickman

But, you know, it seems agonizing sometimes how how slow it can be, right?

00;20;41;02 - 00;20;59;14

Robert Lipka

Yeah. I'm with Ron. I just turned 55 not too long ago, so I get it. Right. It's it's. But I didn't want to just pick on architects. I try to, I try to pick on everything I can in my role. well, at the city, I have a lot of issues. Ron mentioned, curb cuts, right?

00;20;59;14 - 00;21;19;01

Robert Lipka

I deal a lot with engineers. And in my previous job in Oakland, I used to be the only urban designer in a in a transport agency. And so now I'm kind of using those skills that I learned, engineering skills that I learned. I'm not an engineer, but I've, I've worked with engineers for well over ten years, so I've picked up a few things along the way.

00;21;19;04 - 00;21;38;10

Robert Lipka

And curb cut design is a perfect example. Like Ron pointed out, obviously it was specifically designed for people in wheelchairs, but when you come to Edmonton, when I first arrived here, a lot of the curb cuts, you'll see, have these little grooves in them. And so I asked the engineer, I go, these grooves are just for to get the water off the sidewalk correct.

00;21;38;10 - 00;22;07;07

Robert Lipka

And he's like, oh no. Well, they helped get water off the sidewalk, but they're also good for guiding people with visual impairments.

And I said, really? Okay. so somebody who has a cane, walking cane using to guide themselves if they have low vision or somebody with a guide dog, etc.. when those little grooves in the sidewalk get filled in because we have winter, we have, sand and salt and other stuff going down on the road.

00;22;07;07 - 00;22;31;06

Robert Lipka

Eventually those little grooves get filled up. So how is somebody supposed to detect those little grooves? oh. Well, we clean them up, we brush them out, you know? Okay. That's good. and then, the the next question I asked them, I said, well, why are all these grooves pointing to the center of the intersection? Because most of the curb cuts are at the top of the, curve, and they point you to the middle of the intersection.

00;22;31;06 - 00;22;50;26

Robert Lipka

So obviously that's not safe to cross that way. so I asked I asked the gentleman, I said, well, why are they pointing that way then? Are you trying to, you know, get rid of your a certain population or what's going on here. This is interesting. and he didn't really understand what I had to describe and show him what I meant.

00;22;50;26 - 00;23;15;06

Robert Lipka

And he kind of turned to, looked at me and said, oh yeah, that's not good. so yeah, we don't we're not doing those anymore. and we are putting in the grooves, but now we're starting to put in all the newer sidewalks. We're actually putting in tactile walking surface indicators, those little yellow domes, so that people can actually, you know, sense where the hazard is, which is the, you know, before they get to the curb cut.

00;23;15;06 - 00;23;30;29

Robert Lipka

No, there's a danger. Stop and wait for the traffic light to go or for vehicles to stop if they're at a zebra crossing and then they can proceed. so yeah, that's just one example of, frustrations that I have with engineers as well. So it's not just architects.

00;23;31;01 - 00;23;46;14

Karen Brown

But that is a perfect segue to a topic that I do want to discuss. Because, Robert, when you and I were talking earlier, you brought up an expression that really caught my ear, the accessible journey. Can you talk a bit about that and explain what that is?

00;23;46;17 - 00;24;15;01

Robert Lipka

I'd love to. when I first moved to New Zealand back in 2006, in my work at Auckland Transport, I was lucky enough to meet this lovely lady, Vivian Naylor. she's been in a wheelchair for most of her life. she's an ardent supporter of of trying to push, you know, designers like myself. because I was, I was pretty, young and naive at the time when I first met her, and didn't understand a lot of these things.

00;24;15;01 - 00;24;40;04

Robert Lipka

And she took me around the city and we were talking about how, you know, it was difficult for her to get around. And she mentioned this whole concept of the accessible journey that had started in New Zealand back in 2005, through their, one of their human rights commissions they had in the central government, was to look at trying to create, the accessible journey for everybody.

00;24;40;04 - 00;24;58;22

Robert Lipka

And they have this really, interesting images to describe that. And basically what it's saying is, is that I can go from my house to visit my friend down the street. I can go, you know, to the shop, down, down the road. I can get on a bus, I can take the bus to go to my friend's house, or I can go to work.

00;24;58;25 - 00;25;20;02

Robert Lipka

I can come back. I can go to the community center, and then take another bus or take a latte or, you know, whatever. however, eat or walk around and you can get to your house. all of those trips

you can do under your own power. Right? Because in Edmonton, like many cities in Canada, we have a program called DATS.

00;25;20;02 - 00;25;36;20

Robert Lipka

So it's a basically it's a little, little mini buses that people, if they're in a wheelchair mobility scooter, they can call up. Usually you have to book it 2 or 3 days in advance. So if you have a doctor's appointment or you want to go shopping, you book it and then the bus comes and picks you up from the front of your house and takes you where you got to go.

00;25;36;22 - 00;25;59;27

Robert Lipka

And then, obviously, you know, you go do your shopping or whatever, then you have to call for another one that picks you up and take you home. So there will always be people, you know, that will need this kind of service. But my argument is that if Edmonton was more, friendly from a, you know, built environment perspective, more accessible, that a lot of people who currently use the DAT system wouldn't have to.

00;26;00;03 - 00;26;22;17

Robert Lipka

They'd be able to get on a regular bus just like everybody else does. Get on a the LRT, go down to their corner, store, the sidewalk across the street without having to worry about not having a curb cut on either side. making sure there's proper signalized, you know, crossings and all that, all that stuff, making sure that it's safe and accessible.

00;26;22;17 - 00;26;31;06

Robert Lipka

And they could do all their stuff without having, to rely on anybody else. So that's in a nutshell. That's the accessible journey.

00;26;31;09 - 00;26;50;23

Ron Wickman

just picking up on something you said, Robert, I was thinking about, a young man I know who I've known for quite a long time

now. He's. He was just a young boy when I first met him. And he he, he uses a power wheelchair to get around, and and, we were just having a zoom conversation, just like you and I are having.

00;26;50;23 - 00;27;19;18

Ron Wickman

He. He was showing me an app that he uses to, go to go on journeys, in and around Edmonton. So he, he lives probably, in his wheelchair a good half an hour at least, to get from to get from his house to the downtown of Edmonton. And he was showing me how, he can he can figure out the right pathway that is all hard surface for him to be able to to get to get to the downtown.

00;27;19;20 - 00;27;46;16

Ron Wickman

And I, you know, I just said, well, hopefully you, you, you go with somebody I hate the idea of you like running out of juice in your, your power chair. And he goes, well, you know, I know approximately how long I can run and, and, he goes, no, it's all good. I some, I sometimes go by myself and I'm like, wow, there's there's still a lot of potential danger in that, but he's, he's, a confident young man who, who, who has no problems with it.

00;27;46;16 - 00;28;23;08

Ron Wickman

And I was frankly quite amazed at that, that that fact that the technology actually exists. Right. And, and, and I was also going to say that, I've had a relationship with the University of Alberta for quite a long time now, over 20 years, almost 30 years now, and working with students in industrial design and occupational therapy and, and human ecology, all of those, all of those areas and just learning about how students, try to make the world better for people with disabilities.

00;28;23;08 - 00;28;50;00

Ron Wickman

And, and, the student mind is fantastic for, you know, thinking outside the box and being innovative. they're not sort of. They haven't been, crushed yet by reality and all that. But, I know that there's been a lot of work lately, using using technology to help,

people with disabilities navigate the especially the, the university campus and get around there.

00;28;50;02 - 00;29;17;24

Ron Wickman

And, the one thing that you and I were just talking about is, is the, the app itself, the technology is only as good as the people that create it. So it's the information that we feed, it that we'll, we'll get into, making it better for us to, to be able to get around. So this issue of public washrooms, I remember, probably I think it was the year 2000, I was at a conference in Montreal.

00;29;17;27 - 00;29;46;18

Ron Wickman

So you know, 20, 24 years ago. And and there was an hour and a half presentation from a young lady, industrial designer from England that was all about public bathrooms. And so how hard, how hard it is for seniors to live in the city and get around because they have to, know where all the public bathrooms are and when they're downtown, you can't just go and use a bathroom in a coffee shop or a washroom or or.

00;29;46;18 - 00;30;08;14

Ron Wickman

Sorry, a restaurant without being a, like a patron. Right. So basically the gist of her, her presentation was that a lot of people, who are older, are being kind of held hostage in their homes because they're too afraid to venture out into public, because of the fear that they just won't be able to find a washroom that they can they can use.

00;30;08;14 - 00;30;16;19

Ron Wickman

And that was really something, right? That I, you know, well, 20, 24 years ago I was 24 years younger. So I

00;30;16;22 - 00;30;17;15

Robert Lipka

{laughter}

00;30;17;19 - 00;30;21;04

Ron Wickman

I think about those things today. But I didn't then.

00;30;21;07 - 00;30;50;22

Robert Lipka

But I was there with, with you because like, the public washrooms are a huge passion of mine and also because not not because I'm just getting older and I need to to to use them more frequently. But also the fact that having lived in a country where, you know, in New Zealand, public washrooms are everywhere, like it's incredible and they're so well designed and and when I came back to Canada, we were walking around when I first moved to Edmonton and walking around downtown, it was hard to find a public washroom.

00;30;50;22 - 00;31;21;24

Robert Lipka

Like you said, you had to go to a shop and, you know, buy something and use the facilities. And like you mentioned, the apps are great, to have, but it's it's making sure that the information has been created by somebody who has that you know, overarching experience that understands not only people you know who are in wheelchairs, mobility scooters, but also people with low vision, people with dementia, you know, people who are, you know, maybe, you know, have a hard of hearing, etc., etc..

00;31;21;26 - 00;31;44;09

Robert Lipka

because, you know, some washrooms might be listed in a particular app saying, oh, yeah, this one's really good for somebody in a wheelchair, but somebody with visual impairment might have difficulties using it for a variety of reasons. And I could go through, another time. But yeah. So it's just making sure that the information has been put together by somebody who has that holistic kind of, view.

00;31;44;09 - 00;32;04;23

Robert Lipka

And it might be obviously multiple people involved in developing something like that. The city is trying to improve, City of Edmonton has, recreated the website and we have our public washrooms listed now, and they have a bit more detail in them. If any of your listeners want to see the ultimate go to, Australia public toilets, I think it's dot com.

00;32;04;23 - 00;32;26;28

Robert Lipka

I can send Karen the, the, the link, and it has every single public washroom in the country of Australia. and it tells you details of each public washroom. What's in it, what it doesn't have. It'll tell you if it's not accessible, it'll say it's not accessible to such and such. You know, people who have kind of, you know, mobility challenges.

00;32;26;28 - 00;32;45;02

Robert Lipka

They may have, it's incredible. so New Zealand is not up at that level yet, but they do have a pretty good system. and so when we were traveling around with our daughter at the time, when she was very young, it was great because we could find public washrooms everywhere. Big city like Auckland. Wellington or a small, the smallest town. No problem.

00;32;45;19 - 00;32;55;18

Karen Brown

That's fantastic. Yeah. If you would send me that link, then I will put it in our show notes. That'd be just great. Ron, you don't happen to remember the name of the app, do you?

00;32;55;21 - 00;33;20;06

Ron Wickman

The the app that Daniel used? No, I don't know. I was wondering, was it. It was a City of Edmonton app. oh. Okay. Well, it's like if you go to the city of Edmonton website in there and then he they I don't know, it's like trails or something. So he, they basically grade the trails. So, if it's like a dirt trail, they'll let you know if it's, hard surface like asphalt or concrete, they'll let you know.

00;33;20;11 - 00;33;20;24

Karen Brown

Okay.

00;33;20;26 - 00;33;35;27

Ron Wickman

And so that's kind of how he, how he does. I'm sure it's still, you know, I'm I'm sure he still finds himself in places where this is just too hard to navigate for him. It just because so many there's so many different wheelchairs out there. Right. And then. So yeah.

00;33;35;29 - 00;33;54;26

Robert Lipka

There is I know they've been prioritizing certain routes. So yeah, this runs right. It's on the City of Edmonton website. I'm not completely familiar with it because I don't have a cellphone because I'm strange. But for those who do have cell phones, it's pretty easy to find. It's on the city website. And yeah, you can download the app and it has the larger trails.

00;33;54;26 - 00;34;10;25

Robert Lipka

Right. and they're the of the more frequently used ones. And I know the city is trying to up, you know, eventually update all of them, but that's going to take time. And some of the trails will never be accessible. And that's fine. It's just because of great change, etc. be too expensive to make them fully accessible.

00;34;10;28 - 00;34;28;13

Robert Lipka

But you know, we're starting to get more and more, you know, starting with, you know, the letter, right? If there was a project that was finished a few years ago, and now somebody can actually wheelchair from downtown, go down to a particular area, get really close to the water, which you couldn't before, you know, the river. So that's really nice.

00;34;28;19 - 00;34;31;10

Robert Lipka

So in time, we'll get better at doing that. Yeah.

00:34:31;12 - 00:34:52;27

Karen Brown

If you did have a cell phone, you would be able to download an app called Access Now, which I will put a link to on our show notes. And actually the the person who created this app is somebody that I hope to do a podcast with at some point. She has muscular dystrophy, and she created this app that people can add to.

00:34:52;27 - 00:35:19;08

Karen Brown

And I know that, Julie Sawchuk, who is somebody that, we're all familiar with, did a mount mission day, which was spearheaded by this app access now just the other day. And she was mentioning her town where she lives, and they did a blitz. It went all around to the stores, and it was about how accessible the stores are and whether or not they have accessible washrooms and what the components are of their accessibility.

00:35:19;11 - 00:35:37;25

Karen Brown

It's it's really quite something. But you're right, Ron, when you say that, it really is dependent on the quality of the information that people upload. And whoever creates any app has to be kind of content to have whatever information they have, and to have that information be corrected if necessary at some point.

00:35:37;27 - 00:35:53;05

Robert Lipka

Yeah, I just I made the point because I know I was working in New Zealand there was somebody working on that, but the person was in a wheelchair. So their main focus was obviously that. Right. So that's great. But yeah, we have to get others involved as well to make sure that we're not excluding anybody.

00:35:53;08 - 00:36:12;00

Ron Wickman

Right. And just to just to comment on kind of the flip side of all of this too, is, you know, I keep thinking, I thought maybe I was the

the oldest person to not be embracing technology, but maybe, maybe Robert's slightly younger than me, but.

00;36;12;26 - 00;36;41;01

Ron Wickman

So we're kind of dinosaurs in a way, but in a good way. but I, you know, on the flip side, I, you know, I, I, I think that until we, you know, until we perfect the apps, which I don't think will ever really, truly be done, or we, we gained this critical mass of people who understand the complex issues often that relate to creating a more accessible, built environment.

00;36;41;04 - 00;37;13;19

Ron Wickman

we still rely on, on, key people, champions, if you may, who can really individually make change happen. Right. And so, you know, I witnessed that growing up with my father becoming, City of Edmonton, politician, he was an activist and advocate for people with disabilities ever since I was born. And so the city of Edmonton has really benefited from one person, one individual who who kind of spearheaded the charge.

00;37;13;19 - 00;37;45;24

Ron Wickman

Of course, there were others involved. But, you know, we really relied on somebody that that took activism to another level, got involved in the the political system. May change happened. He was also a provincial MLA for for 12 years. So, you know, I've seen how how one person can make a real big difference. And, kind of taking it back to our conversations about small towns, it doesn't get any easier or better, for an opportunity to do something like that.

00;37;45;27 - 00;38;15;01

Ron Wickman

you know, the main street of Devon, for example, is, what, 3 or 4 blocks? it wouldn't take much for the mayor of Devin to say, you know what? We're going to we're going to use this as an example to maybe get the province involved. the federal government even to create, a great four blocks of, of pedestrian friendly, accessible,

design with, you know, proper curb cuts and crosswalks and all the rest.

00;38;15;04 - 00;38;45;26

Ron Wickman

because it is it is a smaller scale thing. It's actually achievable without a lot of layers of bureaucracy and so on to get done. in a slightly larger way. I've seen it, I've witnessed it in, in the city of Lethbridge, which, it's got to be more than 100,000 people now. But the last time that I was working there, it was around 100,000 people, and it the city had a couple of champions, actually, one who's since retired

00;38;45;26 - 00;39;21;19

Ron Wickman

I worked with. He was. He worked for the city, of Lethbridge in the building department. he himself had a disability. He he he was hard of hearing and, but he, he was all over accessibility. And so whenever he got involved in a project like, that they had to do for, for their, for their city owned buildings, he always made sure they had a high degree of accessibility and I was hired to do, an audit of all the city owned buildings and, and got to become quite familiar with Lethbridge,

00;39;21;19 - 00;39;43;05

Ron Wickman

and, and the other champion is, is, is a gentleman who uses a power wheelchair, and he's just, I always would say this about my dad, and I would say this about Chris is a little bit of a woodpecker on the decision makers brains, right? You just keep you keep bugging them until they finally, you know, do what you want because you'll you might go away.

00;39;43;05 - 00;40;16;22

Ron Wickman

But, they do have a particular street in Lethbridge that's about, you know, six blocks long. And the intersections are just so well done with the tactile, truncated domes in the curb cuts the streets. The, the crossings have, they're lit up when you when you press the

button and, just a really wonderful example within a smaller city of, of what can be done, when the, when, when people push for it.

00;40;16;22 - 00;40;45;11

Ron Wickman

Right. And I, I couldn't help but think that it could happen in, in a, in a city the size of Lethbridge and, and it would just be so much harder to make it happen in, in Edmonton or Calgary, like, you know, even even picking the intersection that would best, you know, happen. Maybe. Robert, you can talk a little bit about 104 streets in the downtown of Edmonton that I think there was some push there to create a more accessible, a couple of blocks there.

00;40;45;14 - 00;41;08;02

Robert Lipka

Yeah. 104 is a good example of what I would say probably not the best solution in the end. That's to describe it to people. basically it used to be like a regular street with curb and channel and then, before I arrived, I can't remember exactly when it was done. probably, I don't know, 2010, 2012, whatever it was.

00;41;08;05 - 00;41;33;03

Robert Lipka

and they redesigned the entire street and they basically did rolled curbs. So the curbs kind of they're a little bit flat, but there's still a curb, right, a curb edge. and so that's easier for somebody in a wheelchair mobility scooter to get across. But it creates a lot of, issues for somebody with low vision because they find it difficult to locate this rolled curb because usually they're looking for a hard curb.

00;41;33;03 - 00;41;49;17

Robert Lipka

Right. So you usually get the, you know, the right angle curb. It's easy to identify when you're tapping with your cane. When you get a rolled curb, it's a little bit harder to distinguish where the sidewalk is and where the street is, where the cars are. and so it's harder for them to figure out where they are.

00;41;49;19 - 00;42;13;10

Robert Lipka

so I would much prefer either you do a, a street, do the street. So it's just like a normal street with, sidewalk and curves, you know, hard edge curbs. So they're easy to identify or you do a shared space, which is basically from building lines to building line. It's all flat and then what? We have an example of this, in Edmonton now, it's just been recently constructed.

00:42:13;10 - 00:42:36;17

Robert Lipka

It's right near City Hall on 10 I have to remember this. Is it 103? I always forget the numbers. but anyway, the it actually has a, we call them tactile delineated strips. So what it is, it's a different type of material. and it's actually detectable underfoot. So you can feel it. It's 600mm wide minimum so that people don't step over and miss it.

00:42:36;19 - 00:43:00;27

Robert Lipka

and so they could walk along the street. So there's cars and there's lots of loose people. but they can the tactile the linear strip is designed so it's closer to the building. So people with low vision, they feel more comfortable because they hear the sound bouncing off of the building. They feel more comfortable being there instead of being close to traffic and so, so they, can navigate the streets safely.

00:43:00;27 - 00:43:23;01

Robert Lipka

So these are the type of, you know, things you can do to, to make streets really interesting and nice places to be. shared spaces allow for, you know, shops to open up right onto the street. You could close off the street on the weekend and have a market because it's all one level. It's easy. so yeah, that's a really interesting that you could do with those, with those types of streets.

00:43:23;01 - 00:43:49;13

Robert Lipka

But you have to obviously think of how are you going to make sure you're designing it particular as people with low vision, how would they navigate that street? which is it can be done. It has been done in many places. We just need to do a better job of it. yeah. The road curve example. you know, again, this is what I was talking about, how somebody came along and said, okay, from a wheelchair perspective, this is great, but it's not necessarily great for other disabilities.

00;43;49;13 - 00;43;54;07

Robert Lipka

Right? So we got to make sure we we think about others as well.

00;43;54;10 - 00;43;56;29

Karen Brown

Very complex issues.

00;43;57;01 - 00;43;58;11

Robert Lipka

Definitely. Yeah. Yeah.

00;43;58;11 - 00;44;25;14

Ron Wickman

And and that's why you, you, you know, you need that expertise too, right. And, I, I kind of been saying this is that there's just, there's not too many people out there with, with the expertise to look at the issues, you know, and sometimes, I'm sure, Robert, you feel like this, too, like you're talking to people, other planners decision, you know, your your council, and you're saying a bunch of stuff and they're kind of nodding their head, going, oh, yeah, okay.

00;44;25;14 - 00;44;53;13

Ron Wickman

And but do they really understand what you're saying? Right. Like it's, it's, it's it's, we find ourselves, I think, in a bit of a teaching position where we're just trying to educate people about things that we're, we're very, very familiar with. Right. And, so we have to answer a lot of questions, for, like, engineers and, and again, like I said, politicians, to be able to, to get things done.

00;44;53;13 - 00;45;07;25

Ron Wickman

Right. And sometimes we're not included in those discussions. And, and that's why you get you get a street that's conducive to people who use wheelchairs, but not so much for other disability, for example. Yeah.

00;45;07;27 - 00;45;30;14

Robert Lipka

Exactly. And and it's just I think it's kind of going back to what you're talking about, Ron, is the fact that, you know, I've ever since I've, like, worked in another country and how they look at, accessible issues. I think one of the things that still kind of, I guess kind of, hits me in Canada is we decided to go for the accessible term.

00;45;30;14 - 00;45;50;10

Robert Lipka

Right. Accessibility is now the term. if you look at the new accessible Canada Act that was created a couple of years ago. Right. everything's to do with accessibility. And I still think sometimes that that term kind of pigeonholes people and people who don't have, any mobility challenges. They think, oh, it's all just for those people.

00;45;50;10 - 00;46;10;21

Robert Lipka

It's not for me. Whereas in other countries, like, as you know, Ron, like in Europe and Norway, they use universal design, right? It's it's I think it's a better way to sell it to the general population because all of these elements that we've been talking about, this, this podcast of the previous one, are about elements that benefit everybody, not just people with disabilities.

00;46;10;21 - 00;46;35;16

Robert Lipka

Right. And that term, universal design, I think, speaks to that, more eloquently as opposed to accessibility, which unfortunately, I you know, I think a lot of people think that it's just for those people who

have, you know, sight loss or, who are in a wheelchair or mobility scooter, etc.. so, yeah, I think that's one of the things we need to another thing to add to the pile.

00;46;35;22 - 00;47;08;18

Robert Lipka

Yeah. if I were right, it's to show that, as I said, that's why I think the stats are really important. That's, you know, I quoted those stats earlier. Stats? Cam, recently, sent out their, numbers for people, with any kind of, disability that's, impacted by the built environment. And if you look, Alberta is 26% of the population all across Canada, it's about 24 to 25%, P.E.I. and other provinces are even higher, so up to 30% of the population.

00;47;08;20 - 00;47;30;09

Robert Lipka

So we're seeing all the costs across the country. And these are statistics from 2022. So if you look back, the 2018 StatsCan Canada statistics, Canada was probably about 20%, that identified that with some disability. It's impacted by the built environment. Now we're up to 2,526%. It's only going to get higher. So you know, pretty soon we'll be up to 30% of the population.

00;47;30;09 - 00;47;52;13

Robert Lipka

So it could make our jobs a bit easier, right. To argue for these things because now there's more people. but still, it's just shocking to me that we have to have these discussions still with professionals who work in the built environment and see this on a regular basis. I get questioned, about engineers, work saying, why do we need curb cuts everywhere?

00;47;52;16 - 00;48;04;26

Robert Lipka

I don't see people in wheelchairs crossing at this intersection. Like, are you standing there seven days a week, 24 hours a day, like, come on. So it's just. Well, we still have to argue for those things sometimes it's shocking.

00;48;04;28 - 00;48;29;02

Karen Brown

You're very right about the words, though. And using inclusive design instead of accessibility. Words matter so much. I find when I talk to clients about Robert, Ron and I've talked about this before, I talked to them about showers, and we talk about a barrier free shower, a roll in shower, an accessible shower as soon as I call it a Euro shower.

00;48;29;04 - 00;48;37;16

Karen Brown

That's it. They want one because that's the sexy term. Euro shower, which doesn't imply that they are somehow different.

00;48;37;18 - 00;49;03;10

Robert Lipka

Yes, exactly. It was a lovely lady I met in Australia when I was there a long time ago. I was at a conference and she works for the Victoria government. State government. And she described, how she would, develop presentations for developers to encourage them to, to develop, you know, more accessible, housing out in suburbia.

00;49;03;12 - 00;49;24;14

Robert Lipka

And so she described it, really eloquently. And I can send you a I think I have a copy of her presentation, but it's just the way she, she showed that you can design the homes, right from the outset. so young couple buys this house, and a lot of the stuff is hidden, right? It's behind the walls of the bathroom.

00;49;24;16 - 00;49;41;15

Robert Lipka

There's extra studs put in so that you could add a, a grab bar later. Right in the shower. Like Ron will know all about this stuff. But it's just it's just having these homes built so that they're easy to adapt when somebody needs them. Right? Or if they have, you know, an older relative has to move in with them.

00;49;41;19 - 00;50;01;17

Robert Lipka

They can easily adapt this house without having to move. and, you know, for a very cost effective, way to, to make the house fully accessible. It's incredible. And I can't believe they've been doing this in Australia for over ten years now. And a lot of their new home construction. yeah, we we have to pick up on some of these things as well.

00;50;01;17 - 00;50;27;09

Karen Brown

And can even the concept of the visitable home, which we were talking about earlier, makes so much sense, because if it is a two story house, for instance, and the occupants find that they need to live on one level, all of a sudden it's already done. They have to find a room to transform into a bedroom, but essentially that's all they have to do because the washroom is already there.

00;50;27;12 - 00;50;28;11

Robert Lipka

Exactly.

00;50;28;13 - 00;50;43;08

Karen Brown

Yeah, terrific. well, I will ask for final words from each of you and, as we bring this fascinating podcast to a close. Robert, you're you're the guest. Would you like to go first?

00;50;43;10 - 00;50;56;00

Robert Lipka

Well, I just wanted to thank you so much, Karen and Ron, for, for this opportunity, you know, to to talk about these things. As you can tell, I'm very passionate about it. And I could talk for hours. So if you want to do more part podcast, I'm up for it.

00;50;56;02 - 00;51;00;05

Karen Brown

But don't say that because we're going to we're going to rope you in!

00;51;00;07 - 00;51;19;16

Robert Lipka

Okay. But I really enjoyed it. And, yeah, I just any way I can get the word out, the more I've been trying to do this since I, since I, you know, came back to Canada as it's really trying to get people to really think of these things. And it's for me it's just preplanning for me because I know one day I'm going to need all these elements as well.

00;51;19;16 - 00;51;39;05

Robert Lipka

I'm being selfish. I want to get all these things in to our streets and to our, our, you know, our, our neighborhoods, into our homes. so that. Yeah, as we age, as we, change over time that, you know, our we can live on that accessible journey. And that's my, you know, goal for the country.

00;51;39;11 - 00;51;41;12

Robert Lipka

Hopefully someday we'll get there.

00;51;41;14 - 00;51;51;06

Karen Brown

Fantastic. Well, thank you very much for joining us. I've enjoyed learning from you and hope to learn more in the future. And, Ron, any final words from you?

00;51;51;08 - 00;52;17;09

Ron Wickman

yeah, I, kind of at a, higher level, I guess. But, I can already think of, future podcasts for the three of us, and that would be to, look, overseas at what's happening, in places like Australia, New Zealand and, and Europe as well. And it's certainly, certainly something that I've been coming to grips with.

00;52;17;12 - 00;52;43;11

Ron Wickman

that's, that does kind of play off of what Robert talked about with the language. for far too long, I think Canada has been influenced by what happens in the States. And, I think we need to, pay more attention to what's happening, elsewhere in the world. And, I'm

part of an international group of architects, focusing in on issues around, the social issues.

00:52:43:11 - 00:53:16:08

Ron Wickman

I guess you could say, which does involve people with disabilities. and I certainly get a much different take from people in Europe. Australia. New Zealand, even South America, the group that I'm part of. And they do talk about, this idea of being inclusive in a very holistic way. So they do talk about inclusion for people of color, people with different, you know, ethnic backgrounds, people with disabilities.

00:53:16:10 - 00:53:52:00

Ron Wickman

I feel like sometimes here in North America, we get pigeonholed into, even when we say the term universal design, the default ends up being, people with disabilities. And so, I, I think we we have to let, let the States do what they do and, and, be more inspired by what's happening elsewhere, and learn from experts in different parts of the world that I think have a, a much better understanding of what, what universal design or inclusive design is, is really all about.

00:53:52:02 - 00:54:26:28

Ron Wickman

And, I do agree with Robert that, this term accessibility it does does very much talk about about people with disabilities. And I've kind of within my own profession of architects. I've decided to focus on that issue. So even in the architectural world where we talk about being inclusive, the discussions usually revolve around our First Nations populations, people of color, and they forget the fact that inclusion means people with disabilities, too, in our, you know, our aging population.

00:54:27:01 - 00:54:54:18

Ron Wickman

So I just feel like I'm that person that has to keep reminding people that inclusion is a bigger is a bigger thing than just, you know, people people, of color in First Nations, even our, our, our, our gay

community, you know, so all all very important. And, and if we think about all of the issues all at the same time, I think we'll, we'll make much better, progress.

00;54;54;21 - 00;55;11;11

Karen Brown

A very positive comment to end our podcast on. So again, my thanks to both of you and I will thank those of those who have been listening to us. Thank you for joining us, and I look forward to seeing all of you again on the next episode of Real Life Renos: The Podcast.