



Inclusive housing design in Australia: Breaking down the barrier or a barrier to be broken?

Written by Dr Margaret Ward, a Research Fellow at the School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University in Brisbane, Australia.

Australia has 23 million people, the vast majority of whom live in major cities. The housing industry builds around 150,000 dwellings each year, and is considered to be a key driver in Australia's economy. Our family homes are the largest in the world, averaging 210 square metres, and our major cities are ranked amongst the most expensive in the world to buy property. Social housing is less than 5% of our housing stock and there is an undersupply of affordable housing generally. Over 100,000 people are homeless and many more are struggling to meet housing payments or fortnightly rent. Affordable and inclusive housing in the private market is practically non-existent.

Both progressive and conservative governments want the housing industry on side and the calls from community groups to regulate for minimum access features in housing through the National Construction Code have been dismissed. The ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) by the Australian Government, however, necessitated some action to be taken.

In 2010, the Australian Government, with the support of the disability and ageing sector, sought and obtained agreement from the housing industry and community leaders to a voluntary approach. Together, they developed the Livable Housing Design guidelines and a strategic plan towards full compliance of at least 'visitability' in all new housing by 2020. The Council of Australian Governments included this agreement in Australia's response to the UNCRPD, the 2010-2020 National Disability Strategy. Many voluntary codes have preceded Livable Housing Design but never before had there been an agreement to measurable targets for both private and social housing which would clearly identify to all stakeholders its level of success.

Five years on, the Livable Housing Design agreement has all but failed. After a million dollar investment by the Australian Government, the response is minimal and it is anticipated that less than 5% of the 2020 target will be met. The social housing authorities have done better; however, none have met their interim targets.

A national lobby for regulation has begun. Led by the Australian Network for Universal Housing Design - an original signatory to the Livable Housing Design agreement - a coalition of over one hundred organisations representing community organisations, architects, access consultants and some local authorities are calling for the mandatory provision of the following requirements in the National Construction Code:

1. An **accessible path of travel** from the street or parking area **to and within** the entry level of a dwelling;
2. Doors, corridors and living spaces that allow **ease of access for most people on the entry level**; and
3. **A bathroom, shower and toilet that can be used by most people**, with reinforced wall areas for grab-rails at a later date

The housing industry is reluctant to adopt these features either voluntarily or with the assistance of regulation. Their interest, understandably, is maximum profit at the point of sale. There is minimal demand for inclusive housing from their buyers, and the risks of changing for the sake of the Livable Housing Design agreement are considered too high. Further, the real growth in the housing industry in Australia is in the area of retrofitting - inaccessible housing design attracts a new income stream.

So who is responsible for the provision of inclusive housing in Australia?

Clearly, the housing industry has absolved its responsibility. Notwithstanding its National Disability Strategy, the Council of Australian Governments has yet to take responsibility. Individual state governments might take the lead as the flow-on effects of inaccessible housing design impact on their constituents - ordinary folk who wish to remain in their communities to raise their families, to age and to die. The Victorian Government and the Australian Capital Territory both have attempted to change their state-based Building Acts to mandate the provision of visitability in housing. In both cases, the housing industry lobbied successfully against it. Right now, it is those most affected: people with disability, older people, and their allies who have taken responsibility by calling for regulation.

Philosopher, Iris Marion Young, argues that ultimately a commitment to social inclusion must be embraced at all levels of society. She argues that *“change must win a deep commitment to social inclusion in our structures, institutions and personal lives. Only with such a deep transformation can non-disabling spaces and places be socially valued as important, and therefore socially conceived and produced”*.

In my view, as an academic and mother with a child with a disability, Australia has a long way yet to go.

Useful sites to visit:

National Disability Strategy: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy>

Australian Network for Universal Housing Design: <http://www.anuhd.org>

Livable Housing Design agreement: <https://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/disability-and-carers/program-services/government-international/national-disability-strategy-initiatives/livable-housing-design/livable-housing-design-guidelines>

Published on Monday, 7 September 2015 by the Housing LIN