

Some contributions in this collection, while not describing anyone's personal experience of searching for accessible housing, nevertheless provide a clear description of the problem, and offer a solution.

Sal Amenta

Universal Design for Accessible Housing

Later Life Learning Presentation, October 30, 2023

Good afternoon, and thanks for inviting me to speak to you about my advocacy for accessible housing and seniors.

These days, everyone's talking and complaining about skyrocketing prices and unaffordable housing. But if "affordable" means "priced within reach," then housing must be accessible – yet no one's talking about accessibility. For me, value is more important than cost. Therefore, I will be talking to you about the **quality** of housing, not just the **quantity** of affordable new homes.

And I'll start by asking whether you would buy an affordable bike you can't ride. If not, then why did you buy a home you can no longer live in? Many of us can't jump in and out of bathtubs or skip up and down stairs any more. Our homes no longer accommodate us, yet over 90% of us want to stay in them – like having bikes we can't ride!

As a result, as we age, we have to choose between moving to a retirement home costing \$5,000 to \$7,000 a month, or renovating our homes at even greater expense. We have no other options – unless we're **dying** to go to nursing homes!

Take heart, I'm here to tell you it doesn't have to be this way. I offer the key to affordable and accessible housing: **universal design**. Let me define "accessible housing" first, and then "universal design."

An accessible home is one I can enter without steps, live in without barriers, and stay in until death do us part. Sadly, such housing is virtually nonexistent because homes are built only for the able-bodied!

As for universal design, it is a system for creating homes fit for people of all ages and abilities, not just able-bodied people. These homes can accommodate seniors as well as the one in four Canadians who have disabilities from birth, illness, or accident.

Some say that universal design is expensive. Not true! According to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, accessible apartments cost no more to build than inaccessible ones – we just have to start at the blueprint stage and then construct them differently. Why, then, are we — Canada's 9 million boomers — not being provided with the kind of apartments and condos we need and want?

This is especially puzzling when we realize that three-quarters of seniors 65 and over are homeowners who want to stay put. So if the average home value in Canada is over \$700,000, this means that millions of seniors have trillions of dollars in equity at their disposal – and yet the

housing industry basically ignores us! What's more, in doing so it is violating provincial, national, and international legislation prohibiting discrimination based on age and disability. And the industry gets away with this even though housing has been declared a human right in Canada!

I suspect you agree that decency demands appreciating our contributions to society and respecting our rights. Surely this means providing us with the adaptable, universally designed housing we need as we age. This is not selfish, either: If Canada starts meeting our urgent needs today, it will create a stock of accessible housing for tomorrow to meet the needs of persons with disabilities, as well as future generations of seniors who want to age at home.

For all these reasons, I'm advocating for universal design to be the **standard** built into the National Building Code so that provincial, territorial, and municipal codes follow suit. The organization I represent, the Accessible Housing Network, is demanding the adoption of universal design into Canada's building code. We believe it is the key to unlocking the housing crisis and boosting our standard of living.

Thanks for your attention.