

Mandating Accessibility in New Buildings: An Opportunity, Not a Cost

Rather than viewing accessibility mandates as a burden, developers should recognize them as an opportunity to innovate, expand their customer base, and increase profitability.



By Mark DeMontis On Nov 4, 2024

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Governments across the country are looking at ways to deliver more accessible spaces. In fact, British Columbia recently mandated new accessibility standards for both large condominium and apartment buildings. The move triggered concerns among real estate developers who were quick to argue that this would lead to increased expenses for builders and, consequently, for buyers. Sadly, this is an often-used argument, yet it is rooted in a misunderstanding of both the long-term economic potential and the evolving market landscape. This isn't just about compliance with regulations—it's about tapping into a massive, underserved segment of the population. Rather than viewing accessibility mandates as a burden, developers should recognize them as an opportunity to innovate, expand their customer base, and increase profitability.

A Shift from a Charity Model to a Consumer-Focused Market

For too long, disability has been viewed through the lens of charity, community support, or government-subsidized housing. This limited perspective has overshadowed the fact that people with disabilities—27% of Canada's population—are also potential homebuyers and renters. The prevalent "medical model" of disability often defines this group by their limitations, rather than their

economic potential. It's time to challenge these outdated assumptions and see individuals with disabilities as consumers, not causes.

There is a misconception that people with disabilities are financially incapable of participating in the housing market, which contributes to the slow progress in accessibility legislation. Yet, by adopting a social model of disability—where inclusive environments enable full participation in society—we can unlock a market of eager buyers and renters who have been left out of the conversation for too long.

Designing for an Untapped Market

Consider the potential: In Canada, the 8 million people with disabilities (PWDs) [have about \\$47 billion in disposable income](#)—the opposite of a niche market. Adding their families and friends, this grows to 12 million Canadians, or more than a third of the population, with an estimated disposable income exceeding \$311 billion, based on 2020 statistics. For real estate developers and architects, this represents a massive, largely untapped market. When designing new developments, accessibility should not be treated as a costly add-on but as a smart business strategy. By incorporating universal design principles, developers can make their properties appealing to a wider audience, including those with physical, cognitive, visual, or hearing disabilities.

The Return on Disability Group (RoDG) released [‘The Global Economics of Disability: 2024’](#) in September. The report values the economic power of the global disability market at over \$18 trillion in spending. It also stresses that businesses can open new revenue opportunities and “thrive by designing for functionality and customer experience, rather than just aiming to meet compliance standards.”

As an accessibility strategist, I have worked with developers and architects to rethink how they approach design. Universal design isn't just about ramps and wide doorways; it's about creating spaces that everyone can use with ease. This includes thoughtful considerations like wider hallways, tactile wayfinding features for the visually impaired, or smart technology that enables individuals with mobility issues to control their environment.

Developers often ask whether accessibility will compromise their design vision. In reality, integrating lived experience into the design process enhances creativity and innovation. The more diverse perspectives you include, the more versatile and appealing the final product becomes. A home or building that accommodates a range of abilities will attract more potential buyers and tenants—people who are actively seeking environments that meet their needs.

The Business Case for Accessibility

The assumption that accessible units are expensive and not worth the investment is misguided. The primary reason people with disabilities are not buying or renting homes is not financial; it's because there are too few options designed with their needs in mind. Many homes on the market simply don't consider the basic requirements of people with disabilities, such as ample space for wheelchairs or intuitive technology for individuals with visual impairments. When the design doesn't work for them, they have no choice but to look elsewhere.

By intentionally designing barrier-free spaces, developers are positioning themselves to tap into a market that is loyal and appreciative. People with disabilities value businesses and services that prioritize their needs, and they repay that consideration with their business and loyalty. In real

estate, this could translate into long-term renters, repeat buyers, and strong referrals. In an industry built on investment, the return on creating accessible spaces could be significant.



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Accessibility as a Driver of Profitability

Accessibility isn't just the right thing to do—it's profitable. Companies that understand this are already seeing returns on their investment. By making homes and commercial spaces more accessible, developers aren't just fulfilling a legal obligation; they are also creating a product that appeals to a broader market.

The key to successfully tapping into this market is to collaborate with accessibility consultants who have lived experience. These professionals can provide invaluable insights into how to design spaces that are functional, appealing, and fully accessible. Their lived experience with disability gives them a unique perspective on what works and what doesn't in the built environment. This expertise can help developers avoid costly mistakes while ensuring that their properties meet the needs of people with disabilities.

Consider this: almost one in four potential buyers or renters has a disability. Ignoring this segment means ignoring a substantial portion of the market. Architects and developers should take the time to research accessibility consultants, ask for case studies on past projects, and evaluate the return on investment from accessibility improvements. This isn't just about compliance—it's about making smart, future-focused business decisions.

A Call to Action for Architects and Developers

If you're an architect or developer interested in expanding your market, it's time to start thinking differently about accessibility. This isn't about charity or doing the "right thing"—it's about providing

a product that meets the needs of millions of Canadians. It's about positioning your properties as inclusive, forward-thinking, and ultimately more profitable.

Accessibility works. It drives loyalty, expands your customer base, and can lead to real financial returns. It's not an expense—it's an investment. Every time I open the door to my own home, I'm reminded that thoughtful design is not just about convenience; it's about creating spaces where everyone, regardless of ability, can thrive.

Developers who invest in accessible design today will be the ones reaping the rewards tomorrow. It's time to embrace accessibility, not as a burden, but as a profitable opportunity.



Photo credit: Mark DeMontis

Mark DeMontis has 15 years of experience as an accessibility strategist. Having lost his sight at 17, he founded [Canadian Blind Hockey](#) for blind or partially sighted Canadians and has raised funds by inline skating over 8,000 kilometres. Mark has worked as the accessibility advisor to the Premier of Ontario and some of Canada's top brands including the NHL and Lululemon. His firsthand experience as both sighted and visually impaired provides him with unique insights into the consumer behaviours of both markets. As Chief Accessibility Officer at The Substance Group, he helps organizations embrace accessibility as a business driver.