





Jane Sleeth

Founder

Optimal Performance Consultants

Accessibility Audits

Creating Living-in-Place by Way of Inclusive Design

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issue of accessibility and wellness in our homes to the forefront. Virtually everyone has been impacted by stay-at-home orders and restrictions, leading many of us to creatively adapt our living spaces to meet our needs and be as functional, safe and accessible as possible. Imagine if our condominiums were designed to handle the ever-changing demands we require to live, be fit, work (now more than ever thanks to COVID-19, where over 55% of Canadians are currently working from home), and age-in-place. Imagine if we could fast forward to where experts in condominium development, architecture and design, renovation and the science of

ergonomic and human factors design (HFD) could collaborate to provide expertise, leading to inclusive design for condominiums either yet to be constructed or those undergoing renovations.

In this article, we discuss how to cost-effectively create and upgrade condominiums that can be lived in, worked in, and enjoyed over the long term, even if the owner develops a disability with age. It is important to understand where the deficits are in and around the building, where accessible elements are in place, and meet Building Code and Human Rights requirements. This begins with a condominium Accessibility Audit. Condo accessibility

audits should be completed by certified Accessibility Auditors/Human Factors Design experts. The audit should lead to the development of a report given to the condominium manager, so they have a full understanding of the priority areas needing to be upgraded, made accessible, and improved upon. This will help the condominium in prioritizing and setting aside operating and capital investments over time.

People with disabilities in Canada represent 22% of the current population BUT a disproportionate amount of discretionary money! One in seven Canadians, about 4.4 million, have a disability, and within 20 years, that number is expected to grow to one



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in five. More than 3 million Canadians have a physical disability, with eight out of ten requiring an assistive device. (From the Canadian Survey on Disability 2019)

Once we understand these demographics, it should be clear that there is a growing requirement for enhanced accessibility in homes and condominiums and that ageing and disabled populations have discretionary money, representing the largest minority with untapped marketing potential.

Condominium developers should pay attention to this demographic and realize how it significantly lowers capital and operating costs when inclusive and accessible design is applied at the blueprint phase. Waiting until after a condominium is built, furnished, and finished results in resident complaints, increased accidents, and increased costs to retrofit these barriers. Whether an inclusive design is applied to a new building, a renovation or an upgrade, the proper application of inclusive design/human factors design lowers capital costs and measurable return on investment (ROI) in several ways. Some of the ROIs realized when the science of human factors and inclusive design are used in condominiums includes:

1. An enhanced ability to sell more units to condominium owners who have more discretionary money/wealth, thereby speeding up the start of the condominium project build.

2. Attracting higher-end tenants who are in older age brackets and who statistically are more inclined to have a disability and longer-term condo owners who are less inclined to rent or lease their units. This results in less wear and tear on the public spaces and common elements in the condominium building, fewer demands on the condominium management for after-the-fact and more expensive upgrades.

3. With the horrible conditions and COVID-19 related illness and death in long-term care facilities, many people are rethinking whether placing ageing or disabled family members into long-term care facilities is the best option.

4. COVID-19 will take several months to tackle by way of vaccinations and herd immunity. This buys time for condominium boards and management companies to plan for an upgrade

of common elements and public spaces, thereby spreading out capital and operating budgets over this time period.

5. Inclusive design of the condominium's common elements and the units themselves has clearly proven to enhance everyone's access to the building with greater ease, less physical effort, and less risk of slip, trip, fall or mental error when navigating the condominium. How does this occur? Think of when you recently pressed the auto-opener of the doors to access a building by simply waving your hand over the box; the door opens so you do not have to place your coffee and briefcase onto the floor. Or how winter mats are sunk down at the doors to floor level, so you don't trip or lose your balance. Or how easily you find your way around the condominium because the signage is accessible and make sense. So, what started out as "an additional capital cost" or a design that you thought only a few people would benefit from, you and everyone benefits from these inclusive designs. The beauty of investing in inclusive design using ergonomic specialists is that we ALL benefit from these designs with less error, accident, and more ease.

The application of living-in-place inclusive design in new and existing buildings represents a method for attracting more condo owners at a faster rate. The number of disabled and ageing Canadians is growing, and they will spend money on products and services of retailers who consider their needs - this includes condominiums that have added inclusive human factor design into the building's public spaces, common elements, amenities, and units. ■

Jane Sleeth is the Founder of Optimal Performance Consultants. She is an author of 3 books, numerous magazine articles, and a speaker at national conferences on inclusive accessible design and using the science of ergonomics and human factors design. Jane works with condominium managers, condo boards, architects, and designers to audit current levels of accessibility in condominium common elements, amenities and outdoor spaces to develop cost-effective, successful inclusive and accessible designs.
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