



EXPANDED VISION

Rethinking accessible living with broader-based community integration projects

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Designing a home to be accessible for a wide range of mobility, sensory and cognitive impairments is challenging enough, but the ultimate success or failure of the living arrangement for an individual may depend on the “where” of the home’s location and the “how” of its integration into that community, as much as it does on the “what” — the physical environment within the home. Designing with this expanded point of view on true accessibility and empowerment for residents not only allows architects to realize a greater impact for the people who make their lives in the buildings we create, it can define a new paradigm for how we think about accessibility.

Access Health and Housing, a partnership between developer IFF Home First, the Illinois Department of Human Services and Trinity Healthcare system, is an example of a human-centered approach to the provision of affordable, accessible and community-integrated housing. Serving people with a broad range of physical, sensory and mental disabilities, the design of the Access Health and Housing project recognizes that these disabilities often overlap with other social and economic determinants of health, and extend beyond the individual to community well-being. The project is entirely set aside for individuals relocating out of nursing care facilities back to community settings under the Colbert Consent Decree.

The provision of healthcare and other supportive services in a residential setting is critical to the success of the Access Health housing typology, and



From left: Spanning 16 sites, Access West Cook offers 1- and 2-bedroom homes across western Cook County in Illinois. > Well-integrated open workspaces below counters and sinks add to accessibility.



will be facilitated by a small wellness clinic to be located within one of the buildings. This model of pairing independent housing with tailored services is the specific mission of IFF’s Home First project, and falls broadly under the term Permanent Supportive Housing.

Designed by WJW Architects, the project locates accessible, human-scale, multi-family development within the established Chicago suburb of Maywood, Illinois. The Maywood project follows on the heels of IFF’s other successful Home First developments in Chicago and surrounding communities. By inserting accessible living options into locations that already have jobs, transportation, healthcare and other amenities, these projects truly integrate people with disabilities into their communities, thereby ensuring broad-based equity.

At the same time, the infill approach to community redevelopment brings energy to neighborhoods that have suffered from disinvestment for years. By reinvesting in these communities, the development seeks to reverse overlapping social cycles:

- > Community disinvestment causes a concentration of poverty
- > Poverty frequently leads to poor health outcomes, which can in turn result in disability
- > Disabilities all too often lead to poverty, which can in turn lead to homelessness.

A holistic approach

A sustainable community requires addressing economic opportunity, population health, homelessness and accessibility in a holistic manner.

The design for the Access Health buildings proceeded from principles generated collaboratively by the project team. The project goals included the promotion of:

- > Independence
- > Community engagement
- > Equity
- > Wellness

Kicking off the project with a freewheeling design charette, tenants and representatives from Access Living reviewed and critiqued another recently completed Home First development. Though broadly satisfied with the built outcome, the reviewers noted several specific areas for improvement and iteration.

The buildings themselves consist of two-story 3-flat and 4-flat buildings, in addition to a two-unit building with commercial space for a healthcare provider on the first floor. The

With accessibility in mind at Access West Cook, each room provides ease and independence for residents. Barn doors that smoothly slide out of the way further maximize the use of space. Clear pathways and space for maneuvering at entries and between rooms is emphasized.



majority of dwelling units in the development are on the ground floor; all of those are fully accessible for people with mobility impairments.

Second-floor units are accessible to those with sensory or cognitive disabilities, as well as people with upper limb impairments who are otherwise able to navigate stairs. Entry doors to the common lobbies are outfitted with delayed-action closers, to provide ample time to navigate in either direction.

Promoting maneuverability, flexibility

Within the apartments, the layout relies heavily on concepts of maneuverability and flexibility of use. Clear pathways and space for maneuvering at entries and between rooms is emphasized, as is space to stow lifts, mobility devices and other equipment. Open floor plans provide options for flexible furniture arrangement, while useful built-ins allow for storage and workspace out of the flow of traffic.

Reach ranges to laundry equipment, cabinets and other storage areas are carefully thought

Star-rated appliances and HVAC equipment combined with high-insulation levels meeting National Green Building Standard “Silver” requirements enhance overall affordability by lowering tenant utility bills.

Promoting independence

As a counterpoint to the scattered-site model of community integration found in the Access Health development, another form of community-based housing for people with disabilities is found in Illinois’ Supportive Living Program. Disability Supportive Living Facilities are another means of creating de-institutionalized housing options for people with disabilities, but are typically tailored to residents requiring a greater degree of assistance with activities of daily living.

While typically located within a broader neighborhood offering a range of amenities and transportation options, the DSLF itself provides a higher level of onsite care and support for residents. In comparison, due to the nature of the housing typology itself,

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through to maximize useability for all. An array of clever design features like pull-down upper cabinets, adjustable closet shelving and barn doors that smoothly slide out of the way further maximize the use of space. Well-integrated open workspaces below counters and sinks, barrier-free showers and unobtrusive grab bars, all add to the accessibility of the units.

Promoting health through the built environment

In addition to specialized design features to assist those with mobility and sensory impairments, all unit layouts promote health and wellness by bringing ample light, air and views of the outdoors to the inhabitants.

Coupled with a focus on healthy materials, good ventilation and overall indoor air quality, the interior environment aims to enhance physical and psychological well-being, while providing the stability of home. To that end, Energy

Permanent Supportive Housing residents in infill developments like Access Health tend to live more independently. Both models provide methods for integrating disabled populations into the fabric of the community; both provide residents with the individualized support services they need.

Whatever the method used to integrate people with disabilities into neighborhoods, the key is to focus on a holistic approach that combines community amenities with a home environment geared toward the needs of residents.

Coupling this approach with broader-based community redevelopment efforts allows individuals with disabilities to take pride in the fact that they are part of the regeneration of their neighborhood. This also allows for active engagement in all the community has to offer, including employment, shopping and connections with friends and family. ▼