

# *The Opportunity of Accessibility*

***Accessibility isn't what we add later — it's what we design intelligently from the start***



**Presentation by**

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at ULI Toronto's Accelerating Accessibility Coalition Event: Pathway to Accessible Housing – Design and Feasibility

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Rick Hansen  
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# WHY THE CODE ISN'T ENOUGH: DESIGNING FOR REAL ACCESSIBILITY

In the Accelerating Accessibility Coalition, we are working to accelerate accessibility in housing. The building code matters — but it's the baseline. Today I'll explain where it falls short and what we can do right now to make spaces truly usable.

The code is written to keep people safe and set minimum standards. That's vital — but it wasn't written to create dignity, independence, or provide for a full range of accessibility that people need to live well.

## Five Core Ways Code Falls Short:

### 1. Sets Only Bare Minimum Standards, Not Full Usability

A unit can be “barrier-free” under the OBC but still be difficult or impossible to use for many residents

### 2. Narrow Focus on Physical Features

Covers ramps, doors, and washrooms but ignores many practical needs:

Kitchen/laundry usability

Balcony thresholds

Emergency evacuation planning

### 3. Mobility bias

Emphasizes mobility/clearances; sensory & cognitive needs often ignored.

### 4. Building Code Standards don't support “aging in place”.

No Requirements for Adaptability. Residents age, but their homes don't adapt.

### 5. Applies Mostly to New Builds

Renovations only trigger partial upgrades, leaving many barriers untouched.



*The building code is the start line — not the finish line*

# WHAT ARCHITECTS CAN DO TODAY: LEADERSHIP AND CHAMPION OF COLLABORATION

The Building Code gives us a baseline, but design choices define dignity, usability, and belonging.

## 1. Designers as Problem-Solvers

Architects are uniquely skilled to balance function, beauty, efficiency, and accessibility. By using creativity, we prove that inclusive design doesn't equal expensive design. What truly costs more is retrofitting later when accessibility wasn't planned.

## 2. Diversity of Approach/Process and Power of Consultancy

No single "template" for accessibility — every project needs its own response. As architects, we bring the ability to adapt solutions creatively — balancing technical standards, human experience, and design intent. Cross-disciplinary teamwork transforms compliance into creativity. True inclusivity emerges when we lead with empathy, consult widely, and design collectively.

## 3. Accessibility as Design Strength, Not a Trade-Off

Going beyond the Building Code doesn't mean sacrificing aesthetics, efficiency, or marketability. With thoughtful design, high accessibility standards can be integrated seamlessly into design.

## 4. Smart Planning

Accessibility comes from smart planning, not necessarily bigger spaces or higher cost. Smart layouts achieve turning spaces, clearances, and adaptability without adding area.

## 5. Negligible Cost When Planned Early

Low-cost design features become very expensive to retrofit later. Examples:

- roll in showers
- Wall reinforcement
- Wider doors

***Accessibility is not a burden, but a design opportunity and responsibility***



# HOW RATINGS/CERTIFICATIONS HELP (RICK HANSEN COMPLEMENT)

## 1. Translates Experience into Measurable Standards

Ratings like RHFAC turn lived-experience requirements into measurable targets and public assurance.

## 2. Promotes Consistent and Comparable Evaluation

Establishes a standardized framework across multiple projects and sites.

Enables developers, owners, and design teams to track accessibility performance consistently.

## 3. Drives Market Differentiation and Brand Value

Certification becomes a competitive advantage:

- Demonstrates leadership in inclusive design.
- Appeals to aging residents, families, and investors seeking adaptable, future-proof units.
- Adds tangible marketing value—RHFAC is nationally recognized and aligns with sustainability goals.

## 4. Aligns with “Aging in Place” and Future Policy Goals

RHFAC-certified buildings inherently support aging in place by embedding inclusive features from the start.

Positions developers ahead of evolving municipal and housing authority policies that are starting to reference RHFAC or equivalent standards.

## 5. Collaborative Partnership Throughout the Process

RHFAC Professionals support your team from concept through completion.

Flexible, practical guidance tailored to your project.

A supportive, solutions-driven process — not just an audit.

## 6. Offers incentives for engagement with industry partners

Higher scores provide more incentives for insurance flexibilities through CMHC

RHFAC Certification provides points towards BOMA BEST 4.0 and LEED Certifications

*Leverage RHFAC Ratings to benchmark accessibility, identify gaps, and build a roadmap that goes beyond compliance toward true inclusion.*

# Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification™ (RHFAC)

## Built Environment Certifications



## BE Accessibility Certification



*First building certification program to measure building performance for people with disabilities*



# INCENTIVE PROGRAMS RECOGNIZING RHFAC

**CMHC's MLI Select:** is a new multi-unit mortgage loan insurance product from Canada Mortgage Housing Corporation (CMHC) to foster multi-unit residential development that focuses on affordability, accessibility, and climate compatibility. Projects that successfully complete adjudication and achieve an 'RHF Accessibility Certified' or 'RHF Accessibility Certified Gold' certification level can secure points under the MLI Select point system. Higher scores provide more incentives for insurance flexibilities. For more information, review the [MLI Select website](#).

**LEED's Residential Inclusive Design Pilot Credit:** RHFAC is one of the alternative pathways to obtain the residential inclusive design pilot credit for v4.0 projects in Canada. Projects that achieve an 'RHF Accessibility Certified Gold' level are eligible for this pilot credit. Projects must submit the project's scorecard, letter of certification, and a photo of their installed plaque or electronic label. For more information, visit [LEED Residential inclusive design pilot credit](#).

**BOMA BEST 4.0:** BOMA BEST is a series of programs that encourages smart and sustainable solutions for existing buildings, promoting health, efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and low-carbon performance. Multiunit residential buildings that have conducted an RHFAC rating can be awarded up to 7 points in their Accessibility category. For more information, review the [BOMA BEST website](#).

# CMHC MLI SELECT

New Construction - Point Distribution

Affordability – Rent Levels (10 year affordability commitment <sup>1</sup> )			Energy Efficiency and GHGs Reductions over 2017 NECB / 2015 NBC			Accessibility <sup>2</sup>	
50 points	70 Points	100 Points	20 Points	35 Points	50 Points	20 Points	30 Points
10% of units at 30% of median renter income	15% of units at 30% of median renter income	25% of units at 30% of median renter income	20% above code	25% above code	40% above code	<p>There is a requirement for all levels that all units in the building (ie., both accessible and non-accessible units) are 100% visitable* in accordance with Canadian Standards Association (CSA) standard B651:23 and common areas are barrier free in accordance with B651:23</p> <p>Min. 15% of the units are considered accessible in accordance with the CSA standard B651:23 <b>OR</b> Min. 15% of units are universal design. <b>OR</b> The building receives Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification v.4.0 (60%-79% score)</p>	<p>Min. 15% of units are considered accessible in accordance with the CSA standard B651:23 and Min. 85% of units are universal design. <b>OR</b> 100% of units are universal design <b>OR</b> 100% of units are accessible in accordance with the CSA standard B651:23 <b>OR</b> The building receives Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification v.4.0 "Gold" (score of 80% or better)</p>

\*CSA definition of visitable - In relation to residential accommodation, any dwelling [unit] that offers a basic level of access to accommodate visitors such as people who use a wheeled mobility aid, people who are elderly, or residents who might have a temporary disability. Visitable dwellings allow a person to enter a dwelling safely, manoeuvre independently throughout the visitable level, and use the toilet facilities.

## Accessibility<sup>2</sup>

20 Points	30 Points
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# CERTIFICATION LEVELS

Certification Level	Rating Score	Meet Mandatory Certification Requirements	Meet Mandatory <b>GOLD</b> Certification Requirements
<b>RHF Accessibility Certified <b>GOLD</b></b>	<b>80%+</b>		
<b>RHF Accessibility Certified</b>	<b>80%+</b>		
	<b>60–79%</b>		
<b>Not Certified</b>	<b>0–100%</b>		

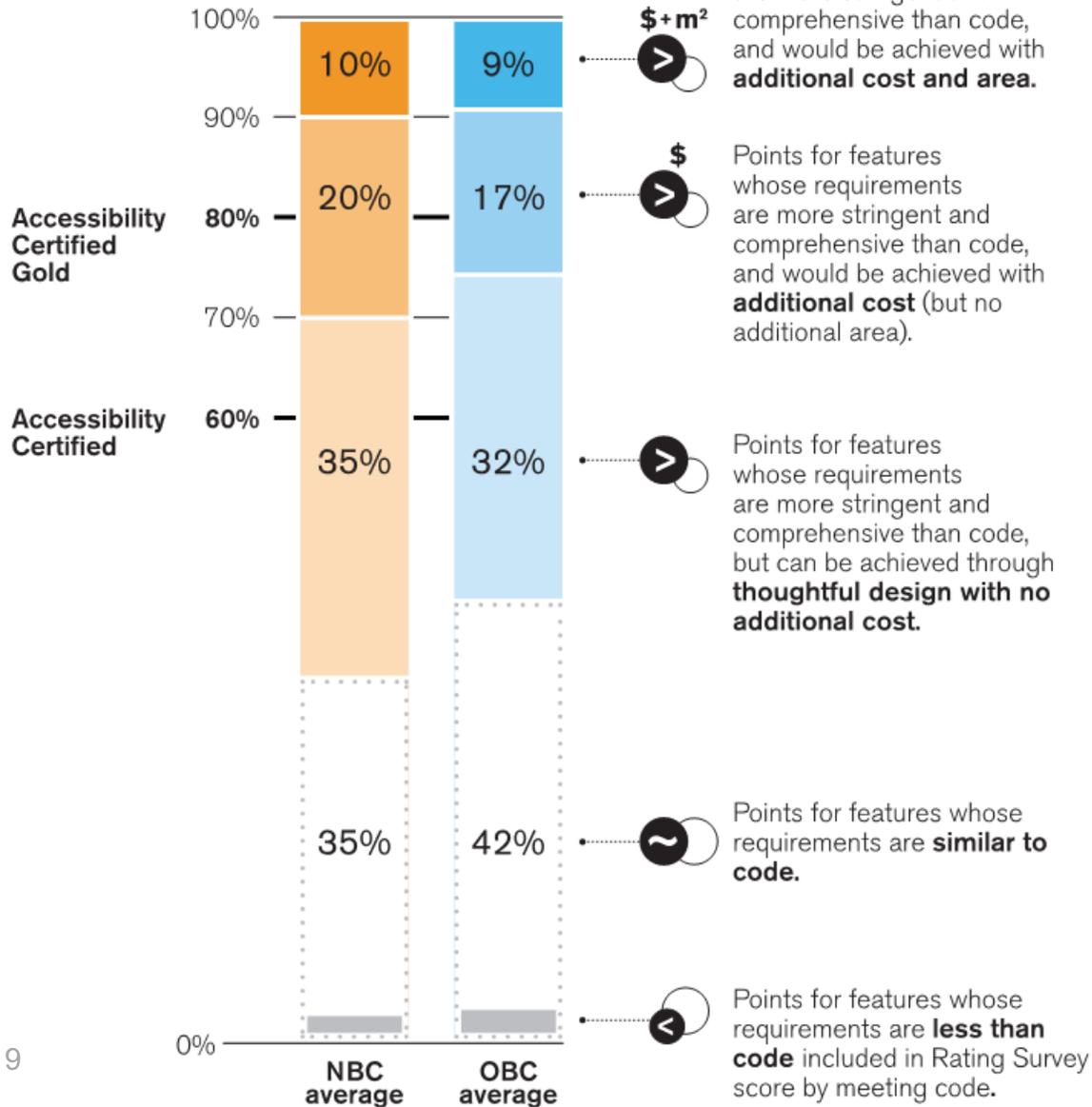
**Note:** Sites are required to meet the mandatory certification requirements to be certified, regardless of their rating score.

Your site's certification level will depend on:

- Its rating score; and
- Whether it has met the mandatory certification requirements

# Comparison of RHFAC Points to Code

Rating Survey score:



## Building to code won't achieve RHF Accessibility Certification



# 35%

The RHFAC Rating Score a building would achieve if built to National Building Code.



# 42%

The RHFAC Rating Score a building would achieve if built to Ontario Building Code.

Source: Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification Cost Comparison Feasibility Study, HCMA, January 2020

# WHAT CAN BE RATED?

## Final Design Plans and Pre-Construction Ratings



Vehicular Access



Exterior Approach and Entrance



Interior Circulation



Interior Services and Environment



Sanitary Facilities



Wayfinding and Signage



Emergency Systems



Additional Use of Space



Residential Units



Trails and Pathways



Mind-Friendly Environments



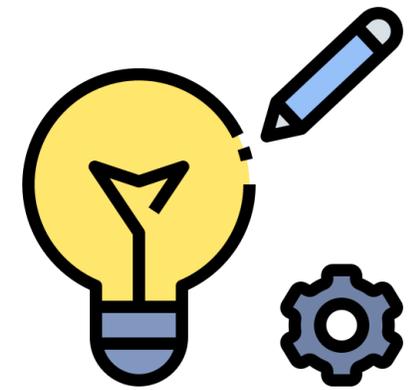
Technology and Innovation

## 9.0 RESIDENTIAL UNITS

- 12 pt.** 9.1 Unit Security and Entry System
- 51 pt.** 9.2 Unit Entrance and Entrance to Outdoor Areas
- 18 pt.** 9.3 Unit Interior Doors
- 52 pt.** 9.4 Unit Kitchens
- 14 pt.** 9.5 Unit Hallways
- 36 pt.** 9.6 Unit Interior Stairs
- 16 pt.** 9.7 Unit Bedrooms and Closets
- 56 pt.** 9.8 Unit Toilet Rooms
- 33 pt.** 9.9 Unit Showers and Bathtubs
- 18 pt.** 9.10 Unit Laundry
- 24 pt.** 9.11 Unit General Requirements

**Total Available Points in Category: 330 (100%)**  
**Total required for RHFAC: 198 (60%)**  
**Total for RHFAC Gold: 264 (80%)**

## EARLY DESIGN DECISION / INTEGRATED DESIGN PROCESS (IDP)



### 1. Accessibility is a Shared Responsibility

True accessibility happens when architects, consultants, engineers, developers, and users collaborate early. Integration ensures accessibility is baked in, not bolted on.

### 2. Early Coordination & Visualization

Use visualization sessions to let all team members experience accessibility. Visualization helps identify barriers that are hard to see on paper: sightlines, reach ranges, turning clearances, and sensory comfort.

### 3. Early Integration Prevents Costly Compromises

Minor layout adjustments—like door swings, wall clearances, or kitchen configurations—are easy to refine on paper but expensive to change once built.

Integrating accessibility early not only prevents costly rework, inefficient layouts, and disruptive retrofits, but also enhances design freedom.

When accessibility is considered from the start, features such as flush transitions, adaptable bathrooms, and optimized circulation can enrich livability and visual clarity for everyone—turning accessibility into a design strength rather than a constraint.

### 4. Informed Early Decisions Build Long-Term Value and Enhance Market Appeal

Proactive design reduces future retrofit liabilities.

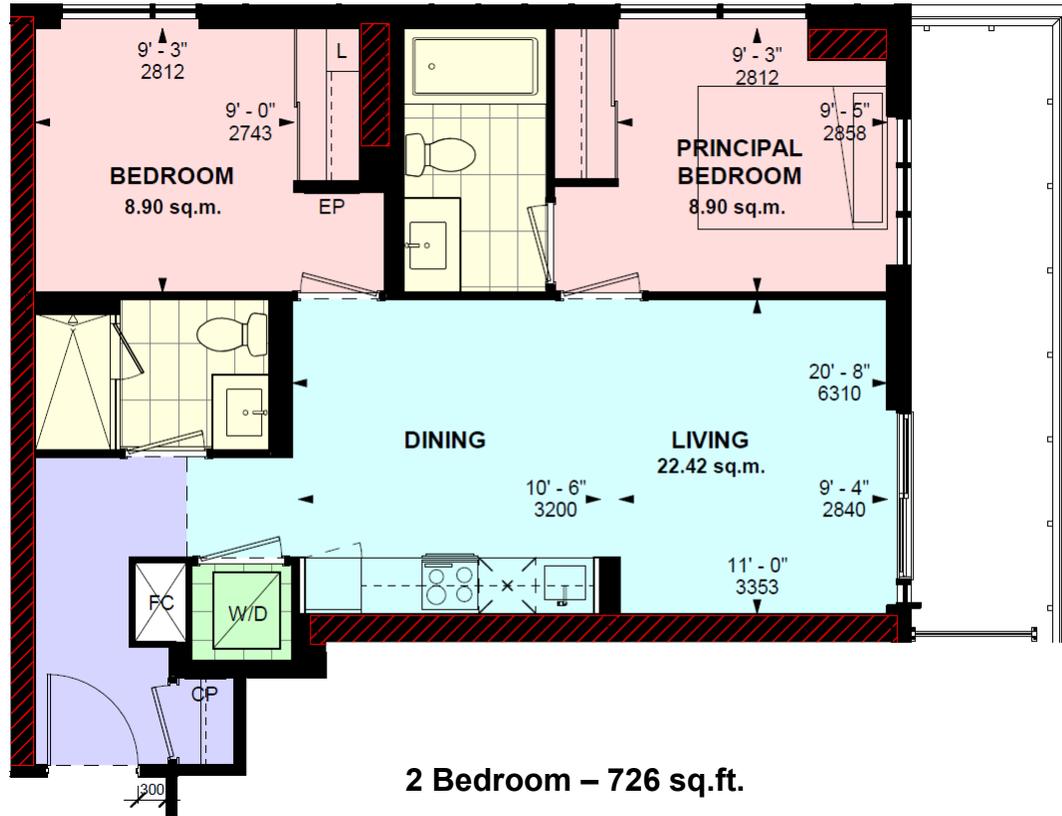
Buildings designed for all ages and abilities maintain market relevance as demographics evolve.

Developers gain predictable costs, better construction sequencing, and long-term sustainability alignment.

***Accessibility doesn't cost more — poor planning does.***

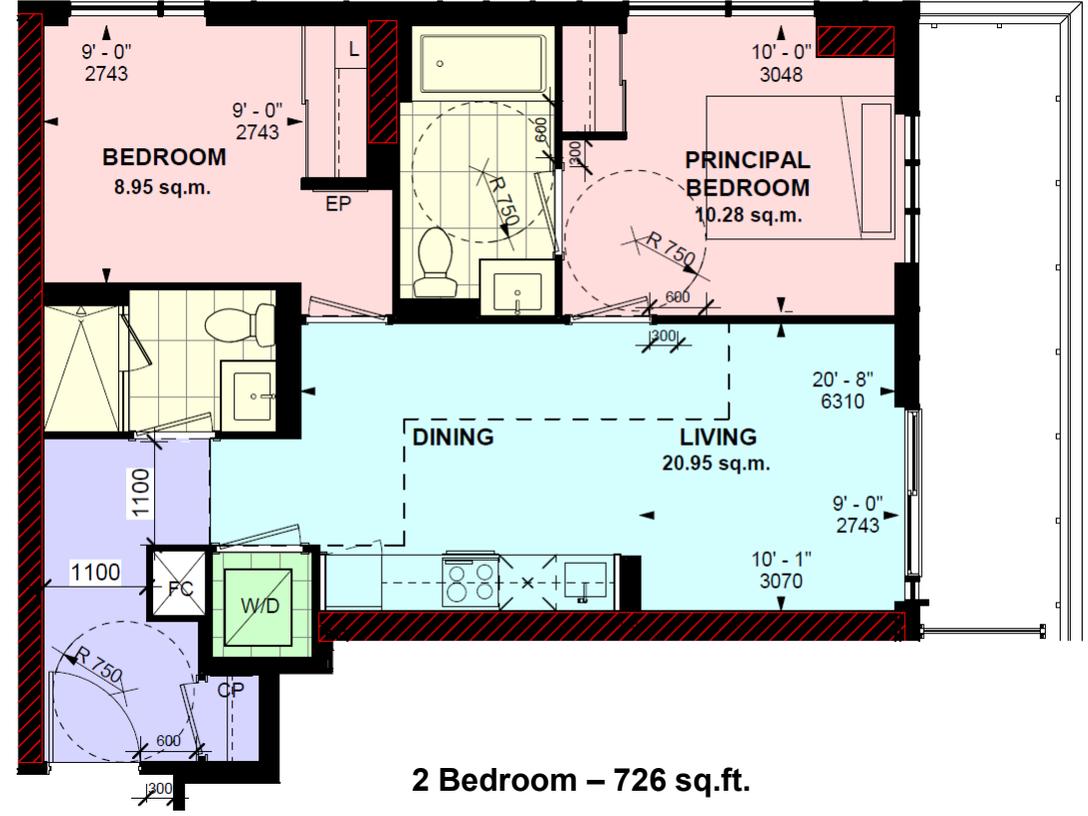
# PRACTICAL DESIGN RESPONSES

## BASELINE LAYOUT - NON-BARRIER FREE UNIT



2 Bedroom – 726 sq.ft.  
AS PER OBC  
(Ontario Building Code)

## BARRIER FREE UNIT

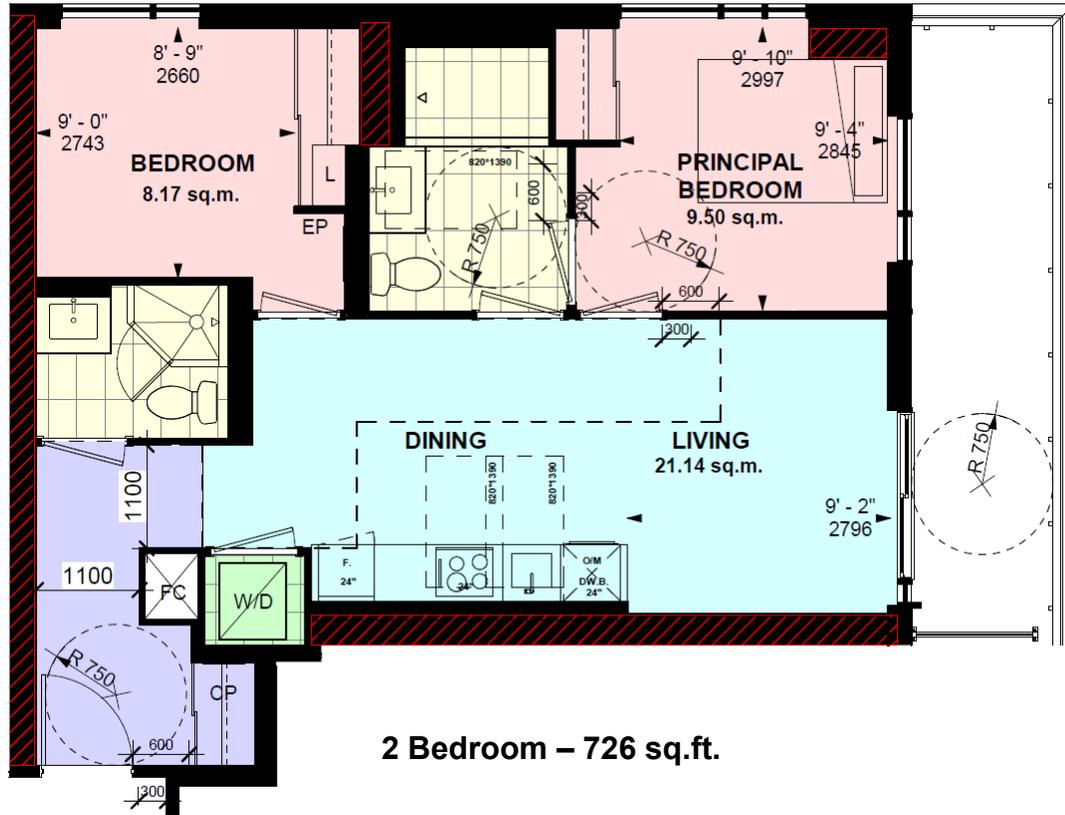


2 Bedroom – 726 sq.ft.  
AS PER OBC  
(Ontario Building Code)

**Accessibility is not a burden, but a design opportunity and responsibility**

# PRACTICAL DESIGN RESPONSES

## ADAPTABLE UNIT



AS PER RHF (CSA B652-23)

## VISITABLE UNIT



AS PER CMHC MLI SELECT

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# PRACTICAL DESIGN RESPONSES

## FULLY ACCESSIBLE UNIT



2 Bedroom – 726 sq.ft.

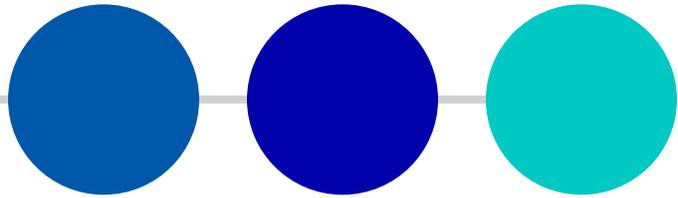
AS PER RHF (CSA B652-23)

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

1. Join ULI (Urban Land Institute)'s [Accelerating Accessibility Coalition!](#)
2. Use / contribute to the [Accelerating Accessibility Coalition's Accessibility Toolbox](#)
3. Watch the Coalition's [Tale of Two Homes video](#) on accessible design
4. Explore voluntary standards:
  - [CSA/ASC B652 Accessible dwellings](#) & [CAN/ASC-2.8:2025 – Accessible-Ready Housing](#)
  - CMHC [Universal design](#) for new multi-unit residential buildings
  - The Daniels Corporation's Accessibility Designed Program [Technical Standards](#)
  - Rick Hansen Foundation [Accessibility Certification](#), [Accessibility Training and Education](#), and [Accessibility Advisory Services](#)





**ACCELERATING  
ACCESSIBILITY  
COALITION**

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