
Shown here: the single most radical idea in disability rights



It's a brand new house, a nice house in the suburbs. Eleanor Smith may never be invited for dinner here. But if she were, she'd be able to get in — all the way in

and into the bathroom besides. "We want to be able to pee not just at our own houses, but at yours too," she says.

by Josie Byzek

Eleanor Smith is the most dangerous disabled woman in America. She is mother of the radical Visitability concept that will destroy segregation in every neighborhood in the nation.

Visitability demands basic access to all new houses: at least one no-step entrance, a clear 36-inch-wide hallway, and a 32-inch-wide door to the first-floor bathroom. That's right, America. As Smith says, "We want to get in and pee. In your house too, not just our own."

Visitability is so radical that the National Home Builders Association — asserting that a man's home is his castle and that castles don't have ramps — has successfully blocked attempts at statewide visitability legislation anywhere. Except Texas. And the new Texas law covers only housing built with public funds. Private builders in that state can still legally build us out by building in segregating steps and doorways.

How radical is visitability? The Pennsylvania Coalition of Citizens of Disabilities where I get my paycheck surveyed state legislative candidates last year. Two disability rights questions got "no" answers more often than any others. They were:

- Do you support closing state institutions?
- Do you support building every new home with one no-step entrance?

No, and no. People with disabilities living free in the community, able to get indoors and pee anywhere in the suburbs? Too radical.

What pushed Eleanor off the straight and narrow path of segregation? "In 1988," Smith said in a 1996 *Mouth* interview, "I was driving past some brand new little Habitat for Humanity houses. They had built twenty houses in one neighborhood and I thought, these houses could have had access really easy! It's like a flame went up in my head.

"Housing inaccessibility used to be like the rain, the snow, the weather. But that's what I figured out about housing. This is not weather. This is people's decisions. This is builders' decisions."

To join up with Eleanor Smith, segregation's Public Enemy Number One, contact Concrete Change at 600 Dancing Fox Road, Decatur, Georgia 30032. Phone 404-378-7455. And check out their web page: concretechange.home.mindspring.com.



Eleanor Smith is seen here in street-action mode. PHOTO BY TOM OLIN

Death by Townhome

by Beto Barrera

A family whose 12-year-old son used a wheelchair moved in 1997 to a townhome in Robbins, Illinois. The home was public housing, funded by HUD and owned by the public housing authority. This family was poor; no other housing was available to them.

When their townhome caught fire, everyone escaped except the boy. Trapped upstairs, he burned alive.

Newspapers reported that the young boy had died because he was "handicapped and could not escape the fire."

That's a lie. The boy did not burn because he had a disability. He burned because he lived in a townhome.

Victorian-style homes are the most inaccessible style of home ever built. Second prize for most inaccessible home style goes to townhomes. Townhomes are being built across America every day. They are most popular as public housing, for poor people.

The traditional townhome design is a two-story unit with

five to ten steps at the main entrance. If you can get inside, you will usually find a living room, a small kitchen with attached dining room and a half bath on the first floor.

Another stairway leads to the second level where, if you can get that far, you will find two or three bedrooms and a full bathroom. A townhome usually gives its occupants 700 to 900 square feet of living space. Most townhomes share two existing walls with neighboring units.

Townhomes are nothing new. Developers and designers have been building them since the early seventies with the idea of creating inexpensive housing for first-time home buyers. Their original target market was yuppie baby boomers.

During the early Eighties, baby boomers learned that townhomes were not a very smart capital investment. Their value would not increase as much or as fast as a single-family home with the same square footage. When townhome popularity de-

creased, developers sought a new market for this cheap, easy-to-build design.

They marketed townhomes to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and to public housing authorities (PHAs) in cities like Chicago and Philadelphia. Townhomes made sense in urban areas. Land space is limited there and townhomes do not require much. Townhomes also "fit" into old neighborhoods.

Townhomes became the favorite design used across the country by PHAs to replace high-rise developments and other public housing slated for demolition.

Public housing is the main housing source for poor people. About two thirds of all people with disabilities have incomes below the poverty line. By constructing inaccessible townhomes instead of accessible homes, HUD and the PHAs are forcing tenants with disabilities into nursing homes, group homes and other institutions, or making them prisoners in their own homes. Or, as in the case of that 12-year old boy in Robbins, Illinois, killing them.

Most two-story townhomes are exempt from the Fair Housing Amendment Act's access requirements. But public housing authorities receive HUD funding to construct, rehab, administer and manage public housing. Therefore they must comply with Section 504 of the Rehab Act.

That act [see "So Sue," page 32] mandates that housing alterations or new con-



PHOTO BY BETO BARRERA

struction funded even in part by HUD must have 5% of units fully accessible for people with mobility impairments and 2% of its units fully accessible to people with vision or hearing impairments.

Housing authorities claim to comply with the 5%-2% requirement. If that is so, and townhomes are being constructed, that means ninety-five percent will be unusable by people with mobility impairments. 5%-2% is not enough. 5%-2% has become a ceiling, not a floor. We must demand that PHAs and HUD go beyond 556-2%.

Currently in Chicago we are documenting the need to go beyond 5%-2%. When we get it done, our local HUD office will have to recommend a higher percentage for full accessibility in public-assisted housing.

How many have died because heconomics forced them to live in an inaccessible unit? How many have been institutionalized as a result of inaccessible housing? How many are prisoners in inaccessible housing? How many have developed bedsores or other medical problems thanks to inaccessible housing?

Designers, developers, architects, and public housing providers must stop building housing "for the special needs population" and instead construct housing that is usable for all.

Beto Barrera is a founding member of Disability Rights Action Coalition for Housing (DRACH) and works as Housing Team Leader at Access Living, Chicago's center for independent living.

How Beto Fights Townhomes

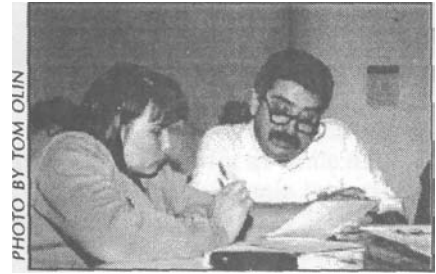
by Larry Biondi

At the time Beto Barrera first spotted new townhomes being built with taxpayer dollars, he was outraged. When Barrera is outraged, he bellows. Loud. While handling housing complaints through Access Living's Joint Enforcement for Disability Access project, he heard from people who had acquired their disabilities and were then stuck in their inaccessible townhomes. Responding to their outcry, Barrera worked with Concrete Change [see "Most Radical Idea," p. H-20] on a campaign to halt new townhome construction across the country.

"The typical response we got from HUD and the PHAs was that they had no choice but to build townhomes. We were supposed to understand why: that townhomes are inexpensive to build, and don't use much land," Barrera recalls. "But as advocates for our community, we couldn't accept that excuse." He calls what they were building "a lot of low-level ghettos, housing that we can't access. That pissed us off," he says.

Townhomes were exempted from the Fair Housing Amendments Act in 1988. That sabotage of de-segregation was pushed through Congress by the powerful National Home Builders Association.

Barrera's groundbreaking advocacy against townhomes has led to a heightened awareness of the problem at a national level. Together with DRACH, he has worked to convince HUD and the PHAs to build accessible and visitable townhomes. DRACH has had



Barrera, seen here with Karen Tamley, another DRACH founder

successful talks with HUD Secretaries Cisneros and Cuomo on the subject. It was Cisneros who promoted the "piggyback" design in townhomes. In piggybacking, townhomes are built horizontally with all first-floor units accessible. Townhomes built piggyback use no more space, and cost no more to build.

DRACH has also met with Eleanor Bacon of HUD who oversees all public housing projects in the country. Bacon has promised to relate DRACH'S concerns to PHAs nationwide.

When meeting with the Chicago Housing Authority and the Habitat Corporation, which is rebuilding the city's public housing, Barrera found an attitude he characterizes as "arrogant — as if they're doing the community a favor to build anything at all." Three days after one recent meeting, both CHA and Habitat were found to be building homes in violation of Section 504 of the Rehab Act. As a result, they must retrofit those units to make them accessible.

"It was a slap in our faces," Barrera bellows, loudly. A lawsuit may result. Stay tuned.