

Building Homes, Not Houses:

A Person-Centered Approach to Designing Housing for People with Disabilities

Completed by Davis Pier in support of the work
of Nova Scotia's Disability Support Program



The Problem

The Disability Support Program (DSP) is a division of Nova Scotia's Department of Community Services that supports people with different abilities to access a variety of programs to better enable them to live, work, and thrive in their communities. This includes housing programs where people with different or similar support needs can live independently or with others in community, as well as vocational and recreational programming.

DSP is actively working towards the goal to close all large, congregate-living facilities for people living with disabilities and to create more inclusive community homes across the province.

Historically, DSP had taken direction from legislation such as the Nova Scotia Homes for Special Care Act and B3 National Building Codes to the design of new housing stock for persons with disabilities. These are highly prescriptive policies that primarily focus on design measures to ensure those living in the home are safe. What's missing from these requirements is anything that speaks to what makes a house a home.

The value of hearing from those currently living in DSP homes ensures that people with disabilities can provide input on what's most important to them in home design. They have first-hand experience living and being supported in a home with three other roommates and can speak to the "what" of room dimensions and safety precautions and—more importantly—the "why" of home design.



Existing legislation and building codes are highly prescriptive. It is critical to place people with disabilities at the centre of the design process and approach this work with a focus on their needs, their desires, and their dignity.



Guiding Questions

DSP wanted to hear from those living and working in these types of homes directly to understand:

- what makes their house feel like home to them?
- what features could be incorporated into home designs to support this?
- what features work against this goal and make spaces feel like more of a "business"?

What is a Diary Study

At Davis Pier, we believe that meaningful engagement drives more meaningful outcomes. We collaborate with our clients and community, leveraging human-centered approaches to deliver and improve program delivery.

To hear directly from those living and working in the home, DSP engaged us to support them using a diary study. Diary Studies are a useful tool to gather tangible insights and allow folks to communicate what is most important to them in their own words, at their own pace.

The Approach

We wanted to know what a “week in the life” looked like for people living and working in the home. We designed two diary studies that were completed in tandem.

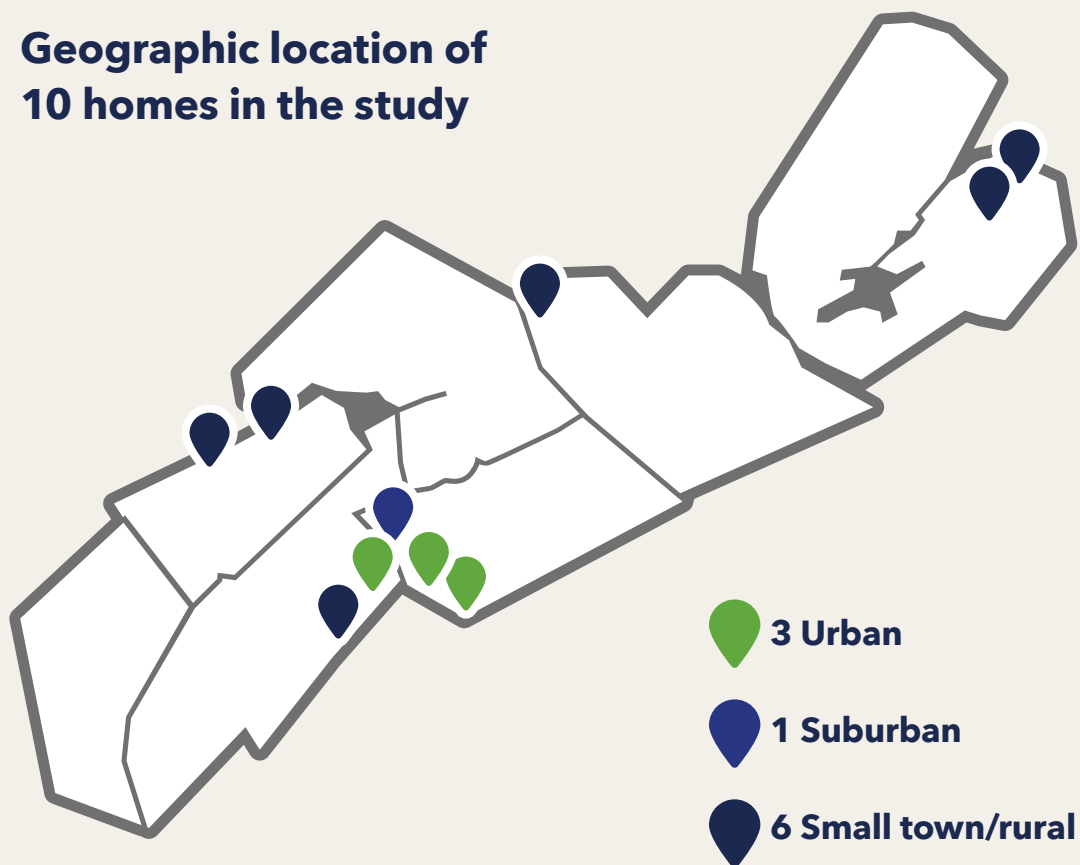
- The first was focused on those living in the home and explored big-picture topics like where they like to gather with their roommates, as well as finer details, like where in the home they had positive and negative sensory or physical experiences.
- The second diary was for the staff working in the home. This focused on how people move through the space, as well as how to best remove the “business feeling” of having to complete paperwork and securely store medication in a bustling home.

Day	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Date	Monday, June 8	Tuesday, June 9	Wednesday, June 10	Thursday, June 11	Friday, June 12	Saturday, June 13	Sunday, June 14
Focus	Welcome!	The Experience of Spaces			Personalization	Senses	Reflection
Activity	Home Tour	Focus/Explore	Time with Others/To Myself	Taking Care	Making it Mine	Home Senses	The Designer's Seat
Prompts	Pretend we are visiting your home—give us a tour!	Where do you go to focus on things like homework, or have a phone call? Where do you go to explore your neighbourhood?	How and where do you spend time with others? Where do you go to spend time alone?	What is it like to do your daily routine in your home? -sleeping -cooking/eating -housework -hygiene	How do you make your home yours? How have you changed your home to make life better?	What do you hear, see, smell, and feel in and around your home? Which do you like? Are there any you wish were not there?	Imagine you could design a home for someone just like you. What would you do?

The Outcomes

Ten homes were asked to participate in this study, with homes from urban, suburban and rural locations of the province. The age of the homes varied across the study from 9 to 50+ years old. This range allowed us to understand needs and barriers beyond recent design trends, as well as urban vs. rural trends.

Geographic location of 10 homes in the study



The homes selected for study also represented supports for a range of people and disabilities, including people living with physical disabilities, intellectual disabilities, and long-term mental health conditions.

In total, we received 107 submissions (64 from residents, 43 from staff) over the course of the one-week study period, which included written feedback, photos and videos. These inputs provided key insights into what the participants were writing in their diaries, but also helped visualize their experiences and provide tangible examples.

It was incredibly valuable to hear directly from those living and working in the home when reviewing these submissions. It deepened our understanding of what elements of home design are not considered by those without lived experience. **For example, in the submissions from one home they indicated that they have a particularly long hallway. Without context, we originally thought this was viewed as a negative aspect and was considered wasted space. In contrast, we heard from participants in the study that this hallway was very much appreciated in the home, as it created “the perfect bowling alley” for everyone to partake in a little fun!**



Photo Credit: Communications Nova Scotia

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No one truly knows the type of life that they may have had or faced, so it would be imperative for that individual to decorate and make that space however they want it to look... make it feel like home for them.”

—Staff Participant

Design Principles

From our analysis of the study, six clear design principles were established to guide continued home and program design:



1. ENABLING AUTONOMY

- giving people control over their environment
- creating multi-purpose spaces that are easy to adapt



2. CREATING SPACES THAT WORK FOR EVERYBODY

- making spacious, accessible spaces with room to move
- making functionality a top priority



3. CONSIDERING THE SENSES

- paying attention to the placement of high and low sensory spaces
- welcoming in pleasant sights, smells, and sound



4. HAVING SPACE FOR "ME" AND "US"

- there are private spaces for everyone
- shared spaces can be used to engage in quiet conversations or activities
- social spaces create a sense of togetherness



5. DISCRETELY INTEGRATING WORK INTO THE FABRIC OF THE HOME

- making space for staff needs
- helping people move easily through the home



6. MAKING CONNECTIONS WITH OUR SURROUNDINGS

- connecting with nature year-round



These design principles place people with disabilities at the centre of the design process, instead of considering their abstract safety needs.

What makes these design principles radically different than how DSP has approached designing these homes in the past, is that they're no longer prescriptive, but instead speak to the needs of those living and working in the home. It places people with disabilities at the centre of the design process, instead of considering their abstract safety needs.

Two architecture firms were engaged to develop a four-bedroom home design that incorporated these design principles. The resulting designs were distinct from one another and demonstrated that these principles could be universally applied without resulting in cookie-cutter homes.

One home took the principle of Considering the senses and applied it in the design of the laundry room. Typically, laundry rooms are thought of as utility spaces with minimal consideration for how people might spend time there. By using this principle to influence the design, this home features a spacious laundry room with a large picture window to bring light in. This allows multiple people in the home to participate in laundry activities at the same time and brings an enjoyable sensory experience to the space by emphasizing both scent and sight sensory opportunities.

Another design feature was the inclusion of a den with a closable door, which supported the principle of Having space for "me" and "us". A common theme throughout submissions was that with four adults sharing a home, there wasn't always agreement on what to watch on TV, or what kinds of activities to do. With a distinct, closable space that is physically separate from some of the louder or quieter spaces in the home, such as the living room or bedrooms, individuals can enjoy their specific activity without concerns for disturbing others.

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Having all essential rooms on one floor is a must.”

—Staff Participant



Photo Credit: Communications Nova Scotia

One other important feature to highlight was how the designs incorporated the design principle of Discretely integrating work into the fabric of the home. The primary motive for engaging those living in the homes was to ensure future designs were intentional in their effort to feel like homes. With services being provided in the home, it can often feel like the business needs (such as completing paperwork or filing) can blend into the home space, particularly if there is no dedicated space in the home to complete this work. Consistent feedback indicated that these homes needed careful consideration for how space is designed for those who work in the home. In one design, there is even acoustic separation of this space, allowing individuals working in the home to complete their work without disrupting others.

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Having bedrooms away from all sensory-heavy elements would be better for sleep.”

—Resident

“

Extra light is good for the soul.”

—Resident



Photo Credit: Communications Nova Scotia

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I think it would be better to have a separate office for staff, the kitchen maybe isn't the best option to try to get work done when there's so many other things going on.”

—Staff Participant

Key Lessons

1. Meaningful engagement matters

Engaging people who are directly impacted by this work was a major factor in its success. It was critical that people providing input on the designs represented the different needs, abilities, and desires of those current and future residents of these homes. During the design process, we worked intentionally to amplify these critical voices and advocate for their needs, ensuring the designs reflected their feedback in an inclusive and meaningful way.

2. Every approach has limits

Our research had significant depth, but it also had limits. We made a concerted effort to engage diverse individuals who were representative of the varied perspectives of people with disabilities, but the study did only include 10 homes in Nova Scotia. We did not collect specific demographic data such as race, religion, or even specific diagnoses, which impacted our understanding of how individuals may see themselves in the new design principles and we recognize they may not resonate with everyone.

The Impact

The impact of engaging people directly impacted by these changes was significant. It ultimately changed how DSP approached housing and reflects the wants and needs of those living and working in the homes much more effectively than traditional building codes and standards.

Amplifying the voices of these individuals was critical to ensure positive outcomes in this and any other work related to building more inclusive communities. Our intention is to take the lessons learned through this study and apply them in our work and to continue to advocate for a more inclusive, human-centred future.



Photo Credit: Communications Nova Scotia