

Aging In Place

National Association of Home Builders statistics show that there are 77 million baby boomers preparing for retirement. While few want to admit that they are aging, an overwhelming number of homeowners have made the decision that when the inevitable occurs, they want to grow old gracefully and independently in their own homes. Because the vast majority of homes we live in are not well designed for aging, a new movement in residential construction, Aging in Place, has sprung up to meet this new consumer demand.

According to Scott Allen of Cedar Mill Homes, "Aging in place is about anticipating physical challenges that are a natural part of the aging process and designing solutions to those challenges into a new home so that one is not forced to move or remodel years later when those physical changes manifest themselves."

By utilizing the concepts of universal design, homes are created that allow homeowners to age in place. It is important to note that universal design need not detract from the overall look of the home. A grand entrance with a wide door doesn't look out of place in any home. When it opens to a spacious foyer and wide welcoming hallways, visitors will be impressed by the spaciousness of the home. Only a keen eye or someone with physical needs will immediately notice the accessibility found in this design. Wider doors and hallways throughout the home provide the space needed should a wheelchair or walker become necessary.

The same holds true for the preferred lever door handle instead of the traditional round door knob. While a person with limited use of his or her hands will be more readily able to use the lever design, so will a young mother carrying in a sleeping child. In fact, anyone carrying groceries or other items will appreciate the ease of use a lever door handle brings to the home.

Other simple solutions built into new home construction include incorporating a stairless entry at one entrance into the home. Having a stairless entry at the front or side door enables all visitors to have access to the home. Stairless shouldn't be your only consideration. It is also recommended to have these entrances covered to protect your visitors or family members from the elements when entering the home. For homeowners dealing with disability, a stairless entry can also be incorporated into the garage.

To allow anyone in a seated position access to electrical switches, they should be installed no higher than 48 inches off the floor. Electrical outlets should be no lower than 15 inches from the floor. These heights also reduce bending for adults and make it easier for young children to reach light switches. Rocker light switches provide ease of use and can easily be turned on with an elbow if your hands are full.



Whether adding garage height to accommodate a taller van, or installing reinforced walls in the bathroom to accommodate grab bars in the future, there are many nearly invisible changes that you can incorporate into your new home that will make the home more accessible years down the line.

Universal design changes look right at home in today's bathrooms. Levers instead of knobs are used on all faucets. Moving the water control from the middle of the tub or shower area to the side allows an easier reach. A hand held shower head makes for easier bathing for people of all abilities. Many of today's showers have become rooms in themselves that do not require doors. These large spaces can be easily converted to roll in showers down the line. In homes that do not have the room for such large showering areas, the tub and shower space can be designed to be compatible with a roll in shower unit in terms of size and plumbing, to allow for easy adaptation if needed in the future.

“Most universal features are standard building elements that are placed differently, selected more carefully, or re-dimensioned.”

NAHB Research Center, Inc.

In the kitchen, removable cabinets and raised dishwashers provide convenience now as well as in the future. The cabinets can be removed should a person in a wheelchair need access to a sink or stove down the line, but serve as functional storage space now. Raising the height of the dishwasher is becoming a more common request as it works well for those standing as well as sitting.

Residential elevators have become more affordable and are making it possible for more and more families to age in place. Allowing easy access to all levels of a home, an elevator makes it possible for those with limitations to stay in a house with stairs.


There are two ways to incorporate an elevator into new construction. One is by installing the elevator right away, taking advantage of the accessibility factor it brings to the home, and the ease in which items can be moved from one floor to another. Another way is to plan for the elevator's future installation by installing large closets above one another in the home. (When taking this approach, check with the manufacturer and allow enough room under the first level for the pit.) These closets can eventually be converted to the elevator's shaft.



In two story homes without an elevator, it is a good idea to plan a first floor bedroom suite with an accessible bath. This provides visitability for guests of differing abilities and gives you some wonderful options throughout the life of the home. If an injury occurs, you have the luxury of putting off stairs until you are fully healed. When stairs become harder as you get older, this space can easily replace the master suite. When no guests are in town, or no limitations are known, this area can serve as an office or a den as well.

Statistics show that universal design can add less than 3% to the cost of a home if it is incorporated during initial construction. Some retrofitted improvements can cost up to 20 times more than the same features included in the initial design and construction.¹

While it may not be the home you are going to be in for the rest of your life, you should build it like you are. Creating a home dedicated to aging in place can increase a home's marketability, particularly to seniors and people with disabilities. This market will become increasingly important over the next 30 years as the portion of the US population over 65 increases from 12 percent to more than 20 percent.²

Whether building new or remodeling, be sure to take the time to look past your needs for today. Tomorrow may be unknown, but proper planning can take the mystery out of whether or not you can stay in your home. With universal design, you can. 

^{1,2} Aging in Place, Gracefully, with Universal Design, Bill Dupes, In Motion, March/April 2005

Milwaukee Idea Home offers free tours if you would like to see the ideas mentioned in the article firsthand. 414-226-8305.

Photos courtesy of Independence First